

## Chapter Thirty-Four

### Christian and Hopeful Encounter the River of Death

#### A. The Eager Pilgrims are Met by Two Radiant Messengers.

So I saw that when they awoke, they prepared themselves to go up to the *City*. But, as I said before, the reflections of the sun upon the *City* were so extremely glorious, for the *City* was pure gold, that they could not behold it with an open face, at least not yet; rather they had to view it through an instrument specially made for that purpose.<sup>1</sup> So I saw that as they moved forward, two men met them who were dressed in clothing that shone like gold; their faces also shone radiantly like light.

These men asked the pilgrims from where they had come, so they told them. They also asked them where they had lodged, what difficulties and dangers they had met with, as well as what comforts and pleasures they had experienced along the way; so they told them. Then these *Shining Ones* advised the pilgrims that they had only two more difficulties to deal with before they gained entrance into the *City*.<sup>2</sup>

Then *Christian* and his companion asked these men to accompany them along the remainder of the way ahead, and the *Shining Ones* agreed to this. But they also explained that the two pilgrims must complete the journey through their own faith. So I saw in my dream that they went on together until they came within sight of the gate of the *City*.

No doubt awakened by the King's Gardener, Christian and Hopeful now seem ready to spring forward, so enthusiastic are they. However, implicit in their zeal is a sense of self-sufficiency concerning their ability to climb toward the glorious Celestial City. The thought of further difficulties does not seem to enter their minds.

#### 1. Introduction.

Up to this point, Bunyan has skillfully portrayed Christian and Hopeful in such a way that their present giddy attitude, their rapturous anticipation of heaven, while being oblivious to the grim reality of death, closely parallels the light-heartedness of contemporary evangelical Christianity. Modern Christians blithely declare their hope in the delights of life "Beyond the Sunset," as they would sing it, while obliquely mentioning death as if it were some mere interruption, a point of transition. Of course drugs, the mortician's craft, cryogenics, grief counseling, death with dignity,

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 30:29-35; II Cor. 3:18; Rev. 21:18.

<sup>2</sup> Crossing the River of Death and entrance at the Celestial City.

celebrations of life, etc. have all contributed toward this vain attempt at suppressing the reality of death, which is today identical in every way with the dying of the most primitive savage in ages past. Hence, Christians ought not to deceive themselves, since this last enemy is also the most fierce opponent of the soul that they will face in this present earthly life. David was well aware of this (Ps. 55:4), as was Korah (Ps. 88:3-9). Now Christian and Hopeful are likewise about to confront this truth.

- a. For the true believer, death is the last enemy.

Presently, death has not been destroyed; this is obvious since all men still die without exception. Death has been conquered by Jesus Christ alone (I Cor. 5:20), and death will eventually be put to death as the “last enemy” (I Cor. 15:25-28), that is at the time of the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-14). However, victory through death is possible only through faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1-5). Believers still die, yet they approach this “dark river” with hope, as did Paul, in Christ’s resurrection (Acts 23:6). What is the ground of this hope? It is the promise of Christ himself: “Because I live, you shall live also” (John 14:19).



- (1) Assuredly Christ has conquered death.

That is, though he subjected himself to death (John 10:17-18) and died, yet he was raised from the dead in space/time/history; his dead body was resurrected as a glorified body so that death was conquered (Rom. 6:9; I Cor. 15:54-57).

- (2) Meanwhile, we live in hope without immunity.

The believer is not immune from trial, affliction, death, and even martyrdom. Paul “despaired even of life” with “the sentence of death” hovering over him. Yet he trusted in “God who raises the dead” and “will yet deliver us” (II Cor. 1:8-10; cf. I Thess. 4: 13-14; I Pet. 1:21).

- b. For the true believer, a trouble-free death is not guaranteed.

It is folly for the child of God to automatically anticipate a peaceful and painless death. He may experience relative ease, but on the other hand God may appoint for him a death which will demonstrate the Lord’s revelation to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you” (II Cor. 12:9). Peter was to suffer death glorifying God (John 21:18-19), as was also the case with Stephen (Acts 7:55-60).

- c. Illustration.

Concerning the early apostles, tradition declares:

Matthew suffered martyrdom by the sword in Ethiopia. Mark died at Alexandria after being dragged through the streets of that city. Luke was hanged on an Olive-tree in Greece. John was put into a cauldron of burning oil but escaped death, and was banished to Patmos. Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downwards. James was beheaded at Jerusalem. James the Less was thrown from a pinnacle of the temple, and beaten to death below. Philip was hanged against a pillar in Phrygia. Bartholomew was flayed alive. Andrew was bound to a cross, whence he preached to his persecutors till he died. Thomas was run through the body at Coromandel in India. Jude was shot to death with arrows. Matthias was first stoned and then beheaded. Barnabas was stoned to death by Jews at Salonica. Paul “in deaths oft,” was beheaded at Rome by Nero.<sup>3</sup>

- d. Illustration.

John Bunyan had a peaceful death, though he had earlier expected, like his gospel mentor, Martin Luther, a violent departure as a condemned prisoner. His last words were:

WEEP NOT FOR ME, BUT FOR YOURSELVES. I GO TO THE FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, WHO WILL, NO DOUBT, THROUGH THE MEDIATION OF HIS BLESSED SON, RECEIVE ME, THOUGH A SINNER; WHERE I HOPE WE ERE LONG SHALL MEET, TO SING THE NEW SONG, AND REMAIN EVERLASTINGLY HAPPY, WORLD WITHOUT END. AMEN.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. Angus, *The Bible Handbook*, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> Bunyan, *Works*, I, p. lxxiii.

But also recall the great faith of the English Reformers, such as Latimer, Ridley, Bradford, etc., who suffered at the stake with great agony, as Foxe records, but were equally victorious through our Lord Jesus Christ.

- e. Now the pilgrims encounter death rather than observe it.

Both Christian and Hopeful have observed death in a variety of situations to date. There has been Faithful's martyrdom, the atmosphere of death in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and then the gruesome bodily remains that accompanied Pope, Pagan, and Giant Despair. Bunyan himself undoubtedly witnessed much death during the Civil War, the London Plague, and the Great Fire of London. But now the pilgrims are depicted as experiencing that which they had observed; they now meet the ultimate enemy head-on.

2. They are dazzled by the near glory of the Celestial City.

Still dressed in their mortal garments and still possessing their mortal faculties, they find it difficult to comprehend the brilliance that is radiated toward them. The translucent gold of the City causes them to severely squint (Rev. 21:18).

Christian and  
Hopeful  
again behold  
the Celestial City



- a. The New Jerusalem is seen in greater detail.

The closer they look, the more perfect appear even the minutiae of its construction. Further, there was “nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying” (Rev. 21:27) there.

- b. The brilliance requires protection for their eyes.

The pure glory of heaven is too dazzling for mere human flesh. Therefore, drawing upon II Corinthians 3: 12-18 and especially, though not with exact parallel, Moses' veil, Christian and Hopeful are described as attaching sun visors in front of their eyes to moderate the extreme radiance.

3. They are confronted by two shining angels.

These men seem to be shining ones of a higher rank. Their glory is obviously identical in kind with that of the Celestial City, from whence they have come; their employment for the King is apparently of a special ambassadorial nature being vested with some degree of authority (Heb. 1:14; 12:22-23).

- a. Their checking of credentials.

This includes the pilgrims' testimonies, where they have lodged, their trials and victories, their hopes and discomforts. There shall be no counterfeit of unqualified believers allowed to enter heaven, no Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, no Talkative, no By-ends, no Ignorance (Isa. 52:1; Ezek. 44:9; Rev. 21:27; 22:14-15).

- b. Their notification of two final difficulties.

These may have come as a shock to the relaxed pilgrims since they indicate that still more caution and perseverance are required (Matt. 10:22). Most likely these trials are:

- (1) The River of Death.

This encounter is for both legitimate and illegitimate pilgrims (Rom. 5:12).

- (2) The scrutiny at the gate of heaven.

This encounter is for the distinguishing of legitimate and illegitimate pilgrims (Rev. 20:11-12).

- c. Their agreement to be escorts.

Now the pilgrims realize they will still need all the help they can get. Wisely they ask these heavenly emissaries to guide them safely toward heaven. In this area of accompaniment, Ignorance will be at a great loss. In Part Two, Christiana, being a woman, is provided with several chaperons including Great-heart and Mr. Valiant-for-Truth.

d. Their advice about entry.

While these guides are willing to assist the faithful, yet they cannot be substitutes for another's faith. We may learn from the faith of others, but faith is not transferable. There will be no entrants into heaven on the ground of proxy faith. True saving faith is an original response.

4. They view the gate of the Celestial City.

While there are twelve gates that give entrance into the Celestial City (Rev. 21:12-13, 21), the pilgrims recognize the gate that receives new citizens by means of an inscription written above it in letters of gold (Rev. 22:14). But then their eyes dip downward, and as a result joyful excitement gives way to anxiety and shock!

B. The River of Death Surveyed.

Now I further saw that between them and the gate was a *River*, but there was no bridge so that pilgrims might cross over; moreover, the *River* was very deep. So *Christian* and *Hopeful* were shocked at such a sight; but the men escorting them declared, "You must pass through this *River* or else you cannot arrive at the gate of the *City*. Then the pilgrims asked if there was any other way to the gate.<sup>5</sup> The *Shining Ones* answered, "Yes, but no one else has been permitted to travel that way since the foundation of the world except *Enoch* and *Elijah*;<sup>6</sup> and no others will be allowed until the sounding of the last trumpet."<sup>7</sup> Then the pilgrims began to despair in their minds, and especially *Christian*; they looked this way and that way, but no alternative route could be found by which they could avoid the *River*.<sup>8</sup> Then they asked the men if the water was all of the same depth. They replied "No," but could offer no further help other than the comment, "You shall find it deeper or shallower according to your trust in the *King* of the place [*this region*]."<sup>9</sup>

It may well be that Bunyan borrows here from the Old Testament image of Israel crossing the Jordan into the promised land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8, 17). However, Wiersbe adds a wise word of caution here:

Nowhere in the Bible is "the crossing of Jordan" [Joshua 3] used as a symbol of death. The image of crossing a river is used in Christian hymns and poems (and in the writings of Dante and Virgil); but it is not a Bible image. Israel's experience at Jordan pictures the believer dying to self, leaving a life of wandering in unbelief, and entering into his inheritance in Christ in this

<sup>5</sup> Death is not welcome to nature though by it we pass out of this world into glory.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 5:21-24; II Kings 2:1-11; Heb. 11:5.

<sup>7</sup> I Cor. 15:51-52.

<sup>8</sup> Ps. 55:4; 88:3-9.

<sup>9</sup> Angels are not able to offer comfort through death. Matt. 9:29.

life. After all, Canaan cannot be a picture of heaven because Israel fought battles there! However, we must confess that Bunyan's handling of this event is masterful.<sup>10</sup>

1. The sudden appearing of the River.

While the glory of the Celestial City has captivated the pilgrims' interest, it has also diverted their attention from a frightening earthly reality. They have been like mothers-to-be who, in so envisaging life with their newborn children, have neglected to give attention to an intervening period of great travail. They have disregarded their dying.

a. The Celestial City seemed so close.

Its dominance in the landscape over the darkness of the river was not altogether surprising since death is not to have dominion over Christ's resurrection life (Rom. 6:9).

b. The River of Death interrupted their hope.

If a bridge had been apparent, then not the slightest concern would have been expressed. But now something has interfered with their hopes of future enjoyment; there is no means of bypassing this gloomy chasm in sight.

(1) Its appearance stunned them.

This was no crystal clear rippling stream, but a dark ponderous river, "the Black River,"<sup>11</sup> with ominous currents and the suggestion of hungry depths. Its whole character was that of being in opposition to pilgrims and their desire to reach the Celestial City.

(2) Its mandatory crossing stunned them.

Here were even the two messengers telling Christian and Hopeful that it was absolutely necessary for them to wade through the river to the other side. Now fears arose as to the possibility of their drowning in darkness (Ps. 124:1-5; 143:4-5); now their souls chilled.

2. The desire of the pilgrims for an alternative route.

The fear of death, a neglected emotion that has just erupted, prompts Christian and Hopeful to enquire about an easier route to heaven. To their short-lived surprise, they are told, "Yes, there is a more direct route."

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<sup>10</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Annotated Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 235.

- a. Only Enoch and Elijah had trod another path.

Since the foundation of the world, these two were the only ones permitted to directly ascend to heaven by means of transformation and translation (Gen. 5:24, cf. Heb. 11:5; II Kings 2:11).

- b. Only at the end of the age will some go differently.

Not until “the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised” (I Cor. 15:51-52), not until those who remain alive at that time are “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (I Thess. 4:17) will the River of Death be circumvented.

3. The depression of the pilgrims at their prospects.

Now death begins to extend its icy influence upon Hopeful, but especially Christian. Bunyan comments that if believers do not manage their time and work that God has appointed for them, “dying will be hard work with them especially if God awakeneth them about their neglect of their duty (I Cor. 11:30-32).”<sup>12</sup>

- a. They fearfully question the depth of the River.

Now the messengers have seen many a pilgrim cross the River at this point, and thus they have witnessed many a tragedy, many a moderate struggle, and many a triumph. So the question of right navigation has become a vital matter.

- b. They are told that faith regulates depth.

The pilgrims are informed that the faithless tend to find deep channels, and as a result they come closer to drowning. But the faithful seem to find solid ground right across; they constantly look to their King.<sup>13</sup> Such who have forded this place with great success have been cataloged in Hebrews 11:1-40.

4. Application.

In the realm of human experience, two great realities face us, namely life and death; they seem so antithetical, and worst of all, death seems to triumph over life with such an insatiable thirst. Hence, it is commonly agreed that life is good and death is bad. For this reason man is fond of probing the depths of being and existence, and celebrating life by participating in as many aspects of it as time will allow. Nevertheless, death seems to sour life, to spoil it, to devour it. Death seems so irrational, such a waste. For this reason death is, if we are honest, not at all appealing. Quite the reverse, death is terrifying; it haunts mankind; it proves him to be a coward who, ostrich like, devises all manner of reasons for blocking death out of his mind. He is humiliated to think that he should return to dust ((Gen. 3:19). Hence, in the light of the gospel, when death truly

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., I, p. 730.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 760.

confronts us, then is the measure of our faith manifest, or its lack! Though genuine faith, whether it be weak or strong, will experience deliverance on account of the unchanging greatness of its object.

### C. The River of Death Crossed with Conflict and Compassion.

While the human condition gives us no option but to die, the allegorical framework here presents the pilgrims' pressing forward as an option, though one more worthy of a child of God. In Part Two, Christiana's children delay their crossing of the River of Death, simply on account of their youth fullness, and thus are a blessing to the church. But here to delay would be to yield to the fear of death; to press forward into the River is to esteem life in the Celestial City as of far greater worth than covering back here on earth.

#### 1. The portrayal of the two contrasting encounters with death.

At this the pilgrims resigned themselves to face the water. Upon entering, *Christian* began to sink so that he cried out to his good friend *Hopeful*, "I sink in deep water; the billows go over my head, all his waves go over me! Selah [*Pause?*]." <sup>14</sup>



Crossing the  
River of Death

<sup>14</sup> Ps. 42:7; 69:1-2; 88:7; Jonah 2:3.

In *Christian and Hopeful*, and we would also consider *Faithful* here as well, variations in the dying experiences of true believers are purposely set forth lest a too idealistic view of death should discourage those whose measure of faith may be from weak to middling. One pilgrim here is full of hope while the other is overcome with despair; yet both are welcomed on the other side of the River. In Part Two, when *Christiana* reaches the River of Death with her company, Bunyan editorializes:

It was here also much discourses how the river to some had had its flowings, and what ebbings it has had while others have gone over. It has been in a manner dry for some, while it has overflowed its banks for others.<sup>15</sup>

2. The crossing of *Christian* overwhelmed with anxiety and despair.

Then *Hopeful* replied, "Be of good cheer [*be courageous*], my brother, for I feel the bottom and it is firm." Then said *Christian*, "Ah my friend, the sorrows of death have totally compassed [*surrounded*] me, so that I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey."<sup>16</sup> And with that a great darkness and sense of horror fell upon *Christian* so that he could not see ahead of him.<sup>17</sup> Here, to a large degree, he also lost his senses so that he was unable to remember or talk intelligently about any of those sweet refreshments that he had experienced while traveling on pilgrimage. Rather all of his present talk tended to reveal the present terror of his mind and the fear that he would perish in that *River* and never gain entrance into the *Celestial City*. Here also, those who were able to stand by observed that he was greatly troubled with thoughts about the sins that he had committed, both before and after he became a pilgrim. It was also noticed that he was disturbed with visions of hobgoblins [*demons*] and evil spirits; his words would reflect this over and over again.

Therefore *Hopeful* struggled here in his attempts to keep his brother's head above water; yes sometimes *Christian* would seem to have sunk down for good, and then after a short while he would rise again seeming half dead. *Hopeful* would also attempt to comfort him, saying, "Brother, I see the gate, and men standing nearby to welcome us." But *Christian* would answer, "It is you, it is you they are waiting for; you have been hopeful ever since I first knew you." "And so have you," said *Hopeful* to *Christian*. "Ah brother," replied *Christian*, "surely if I was right [*with the King*] he would come to my rescue; but on account of my sins, he has brought me to this snare to abandon me."

It seems that *Christian* wades into the River of Death first only to find his confidence there quickly drained. Perhaps he is more sensitive to the freezing temperature of the water that attempts to cool his heart. Then again, he may also be more occupied with the bitterness of the water that seeps into his mouth; and further, he is possibly looking more at the inky waves that he is creating rather than the glory of the heights ahead of him.

<sup>15</sup> Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 240.

<sup>16</sup> Christians have different experiences at the hour of death.

<sup>17</sup> Ps. 18:4-5; 116:3.

- a. He thrashes about in the water with fear.

Finding a deep channel, he panics as he sinks and goes right under; with an unpleasant taste in his mouth, he splutters to his friend, “I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head, all his waves go over me! Selah (Ps. 69:1-2, cf. 42:7; 88:7; Jonah 2:3).”<sup>18</sup> His feelings and shortsightedness obstruct his recollection of the truth and promises of God.

- b. He doubts he will ever reach the other side.

While Bunyan struggled with despair even early in his life as a believer, his departure in death was not a battle like that of Christian. Hence, he most likely draws from his pastoral experience, perhaps recalling a Little-faith near death. On the other hand, the author well knew that for the wicked death was often “without bands [pains]” (Ps. 73:4). Concerning Mr. Badman, he writes that he died,

as quiet as a lamb. There seemed not to be in it, to standers by, so much as a strong struggle of nature. And as for his mind, it seemed to be wholly at quiet. . . . But Mr. Badman was naught, his life was evil, his ways were evil, evil to his end. He therefore went to hell and to the devil, how quietly soever he died.<sup>19</sup>

- (1) His case is hopeless.

David, the valiant slayer of Goliath, could yet confess that in despair, “the sorrows of hell compassed me about” (Ps. 18:5). So this courageous vanquisher of Apollyon is yet humbled to the point of believing that he will fall short of the “land of milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8, 17). In spite of God’s faithfulness through life, yet he has been abandoned by God in death! This is the slander of unbelief than only the sovereignty of grace can conquer.

- (2) His sight and memory are lost.

He seemed to descend into the murky depths more deeply with each plunge. Like Abraham, he was overwhelmed with darkness (Gen. 15:12). Next, his memory failed him, especially concerning his past experiences of the grace of God. Death now seemed to be choking him so that he might be rid of every vestige of possible human retaliation.

- (3) His speech is despondent.

Whereas he had freely and joyously babbled in his sleep in the Land of Beulah concerning the delights of the Kingdom of God, now he babbled again, but mindlessly this time, rambling on about his certain consignment to the darkest abyss of hell forever. These were certainly shocking expressions for Hopeful to hear.

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<sup>18</sup> Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 163.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 659-660.

- c. He is troubled as his sins rise up before him.

How strange is the power of death in that in reminding Christian of his former sins, he does not have the resilience to respond as he did so effectively when Apollyon used this same tactic. Bunyan elsewhere writes that, "God can pardon thy sins, and yet make them a bitter thing and a burden at death."<sup>20</sup>

- (1) His sins as an unbeliever.

These are thrown in his face as a challenge to the effectiveness of Christ's atonement. "Does God really pardon those sins of darkest dye, those most foul and rebellious, concerning which we still cringe with shame?"

- (2) His sins as a believer.

These are thrown in his face as a challenge to the inclusiveness of Christ's atonement. "Does God really pardon the additional sins, committed as if presuming upon grace, of those who have been pardoned when first justified?"

- d. He is plagued by visions of hell.

Whereas in the Valley of the Shadow of Death the Hobgoblins and Evil Spirits there had only pinched him and subtly whispered evil suggestions, here, smelling of sulphur, they positively dragged him downward, and he seemed powerless to resist. All he could do was repeatedly mumble about how disgusting and horrible they were.

- e. He believes there is hope only for Hopeful.

Christian has secretly admired in Hopeful a quality of holy expectation and confidence that he now acknowledges, in spite of his doctrinal acumen, to have been lacking in his own life. Though in effect, he is also suggesting, "You, my brother, are far more worthy of heaven than I" (Phil. 2:3). And graces are not the ground's of successful entrance into heaven for any person.

- f. He is convinced of being discarded by Christ.

Under hellish pressure, Christian is really quite carnal in his reasoning here. He suggests that if he did have that particular virtue, so characteristic of Hopeful, which he sadly lacks, then and then only would Christ come to his aid. But Christ has not come to save the virtuous, only "the poor in spirit" and "those who mourn" (Matt. 5:3-4), only "sinners" (Luke 18:13), only the "ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). Christian has grounds for being received, not abandoned.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., I, p. 730.

- g. He contemplates his condition.

His inward “musing” or reflection here is not good. In looking within himself he can only see real grounds for despair, that is carnality, self-interest, a tending to works-righteousness, and unbelief. Rather, he desperately needs to look outside of himself to the Lord Jesus Christ, his doing and dying and dominion. But Hopeful understands this vital matter, and does rightly direct his brother.

- h. He revives to declare his beholding of Christ.

Taking the good advice of his companion, Christian lifts up his head and, through the eye of faith, beholds Christ beckoning him from the Celestial City. As a result, the horror of the river slips from view while at the same time the glory of that Kingdom catches his face and commences a work of transformation. Further, words of truth from the King are now heard:

- (1) I have redeemed you (Isa. 43:1a).

Christian, you have been irrevocably purchased by Me.

- (2) I have called you by name (Isa. 43:1b).

Christian, you are particularly one sinner belonging to Me.

- (3) I will be with you (Isa. 43:2).

Christian, you will assuredly pass through this ordeal to Me.

3. The crossing of Hopeful buoyed with composure and faith.

Then said *Hopeful*, “My brother, you have quite forgotten the text where it speaks of the wicked, ‘There is no band [*pain*] in their death, but their strength is firm; they are not troubled as other men, neither are they plagued like other men.’<sup>21</sup>

These troubles and distresses that you are experiencing in these waters are no indication that *God* has abandoned you; rather they are sent to test you as to whether you will recall to mind evidences of his past goodness, and now rely upon him in the midst of your present trials.”

Then I saw in my dream that *Christian* was in deep thought for a while, so that *Hopeful* spoke to him further, “Be of good cheer [*courageous*], *Jesus Christ* makes you whole.” And with that, *Christian* exclaimed with a loud voice, “Oh I see him again! And he tells me, ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overflow you.’”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ps. 73:4-5.

<sup>22</sup> Isa. 43:1-2.

The entrance of Hopeful into the River of Death, as with his conversion testimony in contrast with that of Christian, is more regular according to biblical standards. Certainly not all pilgrims attain this level of experience, though all ought to aspire. A similar contrast has been made in this regard between Little-faith and Great-grace. However, as we saw by way of illustration at the commencement of this chapter, the history of the Christian church is scattered with accounts of pilgrims who have crossed these dark waters with God-glorifying triumph. So John Greenleaf Whittler writes of this surefootedness in death.

And so beside the silent sea  
I wait the muffled oar;  
No harm from Him can come to me  
On ocean or on shore.  
  
I know not where His islands lift  
Their fronded palms in air;  
I only know I cannot drift  
Beyond His love and care.

- a. He finds the bottom firm so that he holds Christian.

While death is very much a solo experience (Job 1:21), yet Bunyan uses allegorical license here when he portrays both pilgrims as being in fellowship during their crossing of the River of Death. Though more to the point, Hopeful, in his assistance of his struggling brother, is in fact a mediator of dying grace that is mediated upon the allegory's leading character. Nevertheless, Hopeful does, with steadfastness and joy, well represent the overcoming saint (Rev. 2:7; 3:12, 21). The firmness of the shallow river-bed most likely parallels the firmness of the Jordan river-bed which Israel crossed when entering Canaan (Josh. 3:13-17).

- b. He points to men ahead waiting to receive them.

Again Hopeful is forward looking (Rom. 8:24); he sees the gate of the City and beckoning citizens ahead. They too have known struggle at this point. But depressed Christian can only think negatively; he is weighed down with his lack of merit, unlike Hopeful as he wrongly surmises. However, good biblical therapy will continue to be applied as is here needed.

- c. He commends the Word of God to Christian.

Hopeful recommends Psalm 73:4-5 to his downcast friend since in this passage of Scripture, Asaph indicates that while the godless of this world often die with relative ease, sometimes the children of God struggle with symptoms of guilt, unbelief, and physical pain. Notwithstanding this seeming anomaly, Asaph also adds that the wicked are "cast down to destruction," while the saints awaken to the truth that they are "continually with God" and will ultimately be "received up into glory" (Ps. 73:23-24).

- d. He explains that Christian's faith is being tested.

How forgetful Christian is since he had earlier made this very point with Apollyon when challenged concerning the trials that saints endure for long periods. God does have a right to expect loyalty from those He has continued to bless and preserve. Sometimes pilgrims do poorly with this test, but at the same time they nevertheless learn on account of it.

- e. He directs Christian toward his Savior.

In other words, Hopeful assures Christian that Jesus Christ will save him to the end. This is the ground that he must stand upon while encountering death. Having been saved at the Wicket-gate, he will be consummately saved through being delivered to the Celestial City. This truth may be relied upon since "whom He [God] justified, these He also glorified" (Rom. 8:30).



Christian and Hopeful anticipate the shore of Heaven

## 4. The encouragement of the pilgrims' arrival at the other side.

Then they both took courage, with the result that the enemy then became as still as a stone,<sup>23</sup> until they had fully crossed over. Therefore *Christian* now discovered solid ground to stand upon; and so it followed that the rest of the *River* was found to be shallow. And thus they both crossed over.

Now that *Christian* began to sink no more since his feet also found solid ground to wade upon, namely the commendation of *Christ* by his companion, he joined *Hopeful* in more rapidly passing through the shallows. Both pilgrims, their countenances beginning to shine, were now resolutely looking ahead. Their hearts were now knit together as never before in "hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2).

## a. They find the enemy has been vanquished.

When *Israel* safely passed through the Red Sea, *Moses* and the nation sang a song of victory declaring that the enemy was as "motionless as stone" (Ex. 15:16). So the pilgrims here concluded that the enemy of death had likewise been completely conquered, that is with regard to their particular cases.

## b. They find their footing to be firm.

Thus it was that through the encouragement of *Jesus Christ*, and for his sake alone, both pilgrims not only found a firm footing, but also arrived on dry land on the other side (I Cor. Probably they now returned to their former habit of singing, such as again from the words of *Anne Cousin*:

The King there, in His beauty,  
Without a veil is seen;  
It were a well-spent journey,  
Though seven deaths lay between:  
The Lamb, with His fair army,  
Doth on Mt. Zion stand,  
And glory, glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel's land.

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<sup>23</sup> Exod. 15:16.