

Chapter Thirty Six

The Fearful End of Ignorance

A. Ignorance crosses the River of Death.

NOW while I [*Bunyan*] was gazing upon all these things, I turned my head to look back and saw Ignorance come up to the bank of the *River*: but he was able to quickly reach the other side, and without half the difficulty that *Christian* and *Hopeful* had experienced.¹ For it then happened that he found in that place a ferryman named *Vain-hope* who, with his boat, was able to transport him across.

From Bunyan's lofty perspective, in contemplating his calling, he happens to look behind him and recognize Ignorance approaching the River of Death. One can only speculate as to how he fared with the Gardener at the Country of Beulah. Whatever difficulties he encountered, it is certain that he would have found refuge in declaring that he had good thoughts in his heart.

1. Introduction.

While the preceding sharp debate between Christian and Ignorance may have presented fertile ground for doctrinal conflict concerning their opposing gospels, it is the devastating final scene here that provokes a host of opinionated assessments. Kelman calls it, "one of the dreariest passages in all literature, certainly bad art."² On the other hand, Newey describes it as redemptive art, that is as a literary device, which rises above Bunyan's restrictive Calvinistic creed.³ Wakefield, being more universalistic, is unhappy with both Ignorance's reprobate designation and the total denunciation of his gospel.⁴ However, Sharrock comes much closer to Bunyan's perspective by stating: "He [Ignorance] does, after all Christian's arguments, persist in the error of reliance on his own righteousness: There is his total and shocking complacency: his reliance on the good state of his own religious feelings springs from his unshakeable vanity rather than from any theological argument. He is self-sufficient; he will not learn. It is this willful ignorance that makes him deficient on any view of Christian humility."⁵ Of course the reality is that the author intentionally concludes his allegory on such a somber note, certainly not for the sake of art, but rather because of his biblical pastoral concern. In being totally committed to Scripture, without any reservation whatsoever, he well knows that not all religious people are going to heaven, whatever their testimony may

¹ Ps. 73:3-4.

² Kelman, *The Road*, Vol. II, p. 196.

³ Newey, ed., *The Pilgrim's Progress, Critical and Historical Views*, p. 44.

⁴ Wakefield *Bunyan The Christian*. pp. 48-49, 89.

⁵ Sharrock, ed., *Casebook, The Pilgrim's Progress*, pp. 190-191.

be. Further, Jesus Christ himself taught that some who really believe they are going to heaven are in for a big shock (Matt. 7:21-23). Therefore, dispensing with the temptation to provide a happy ending that troubles no one, he decides to declare the truth that will warn everyone.

1. He progresses with less fear and hesitancy.

With real grounds for concern, yet Ignorance arrives at the River, seemingly with hardly a care in the world. He saunters down to the riverbank alone, and stand there alone with no one to counsel him; though he does confidently muse with himself as a man of initiative, innovation, and self-confidence.

2. He employs a nearby Ferry-man named Vain-hope.

Perhaps this enterprising vendor of comfortable transportation, a cousin of Vain-confidence?, only showed his face when a good business prospect arrived. He certainly had an aversion to angels. At any rate, Ignorance is quick to employ this Ferry-man for the cost of his soul. The outcome is a trouble-free crossing that only reinforces his delusion. But why did not the two shining ones indicate to Christian and Hopeful this means of crossing the River of Death? Because while it is a possibility, yet it is an impossibility for legitimate pilgrims.



Vain-hope the ferryman, and his confident passenger

3. Application.

A peaceful death, especially with the advent of drugs today, is no guarantee of entrance into heaven any more than a struggle in death is an indication of probable entrance into hell (Ps. 73:3-4). Bunyan comments:

He that dies quietly, suddenly, or under consternation of spirit, may go to heaven, or may go to hell; no man can tell whether a man goes, by any such manner of death. The judgment, therefore, that we make of the eternal condition of a man must be gathered from another consideration, to wit, Did the man die in his sins? did he die in unbelief? did he die before he was born again?⁶

B. Ignorance ascends the hill to the Gate of the City.

So, as was the case with the others I had watched, he ascended the *Hill* and approached the gate of the *Celestial City*, except that he traveled alone; neither did any man meet him and offer the least encouragement.

Having discarded his earthly garments with the greatest ease, safely on the other side Ignorance looks upward toward the Celestial City and plans his ascent by means of a road with many fresh footprints. Faintly hearing the peal of bells, he mistakenly supposes that they herald his imminent arrival. So feeling supremely confident, he eagerly presses upward.

1. He proceeds alone without any assisting escort.

In the bliss of his foolishness, not querying why no welcoming party has arrived, Ignorance finds strength in himself to scale the heights of heaven, much like his real master (Is. 14:13-14). His self-assertiveness blinds him to the rigors of God's holy assessment.

2. He receives no encouragement to seek entry.

In all of his climb, there was not given to him so much as one indication of his prospective welcome. Such an idea was conjured up solely within the recesses of his conspiring heart, and not on account of an encouraging Word from God.

3. Application.

Here is the supreme delusion, namely that of a man who not only ignores the truth as earlier presented so convincingly by Christian, but also relentlessly, enthusiastically, doggedly, blindly pursues a lie. He calls darkness to be light, bitter to be sweet, error to be truth, that is until that awful day of revelation before God when his delusion is so shockingly revealed, and he is paralyzed with the horror of it all. Surely even the honest expectation of hell would be better than this.

⁶ John Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 360

C. Ignorance seeks entrance into the Celestial City.

When he had reached the gate, he looked up at the writing that was inscribed above; and then he began to knock, supposing that he would quickly be permitted to gain entrance. But the men who peered at him over the top of the gate first asked, "From where have you come? And what is it that you desire?"

So *Ignorance* replied, "I have eaten and have drunk in the presence of the *King*, and he has taught in our streets."⁷ Then they asked him for his certificate [*scroll*], so that they might go to the *King* and show it to him.

So he fumbled in his chest pocket and yet was unable to find anything. Then they further inquired, "Have you none?" But the man answered not so much as a word.⁸

Obviously Ignorance is a very determined person and he is convinced that he can climb to the heights of heaven unaided. Yet such strenuous resolve, for all of its obtaining of arrival outside the Gate, will still not obtain that same Gate's opening, no not so much as a hair's breadth. Others have tried and miserably failed. So Bunyan illustrates:

'I will ascend,' says one, 'above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the most High' (Isa. 14:14). And I, says another, will set my nest among the stars of heaven (Obad. 4). Well, but what of all this? If heaven has gates, and they shall be shut, how wilt thou go in thither? Though such should climb up to heaven, from thence will God bring them down (Amos 9:2).⁹

1. He misinterprets the inscription over the Gate.

It read: "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14). So thought Ignorance, "Yes, my obedience to God's commandments will certainly qualify here." Yet he completely failed to understand that what was required were works evidencing justification and not works producing justification.

2. He knocks boldly expecting immediate entrance.

His confidence was now multiplied so that his knocking on the Gate of the City was very forceful. Certainly he expected an interrogation since such a prestigious municipality could not afford to admit riff-raff and exceedingly sinful sinners. But he could ably testify to the goodness of his heart in such a way that the King would be genuinely impressed.

3. He falters in his investigation by the gatekeepers.

Presumably it is Enoch, Moses, and Elijah who examine Ignorance, and it is their unexpected line of questioning that may have first suggested to the enquirer that he

⁷ Luke 13:26-27.

⁸ Matt. 22:12; Rom. 3:19.

⁹ Bunyan, *Works*, Vol. II, p. 9.

lacks qualifications. For this reason he determines to put pressure on the gatekeepers, to impress them with his importance and worthiness.

- a. They ask for a testimony.

Where do you come from? What is your desire here? Actually these questions should not have worried Ignorance provided he had made his journey via the Wicket-gate. But perhaps, deep down, he knew his lack here and so endeavored to cover up by means of attempting to bring influence to bear on the gatekeepers.

- (1) He has had intimate fellowship with the King.

By this Ignorance means that he has very proudly lived where the name of Jesus Christ has been commonly respected. He has been most active in church life and highly regards Christian seasons and Christian ethics (Luke 13:26).

- (2) He has heard the teaching of the King.

For many years he has consistently sat under preaching from the Bible about Jesus Christ. As a result he has become very familiar with good principles for daily living. The King is bound to be aware of his faithfulness (Luke 13:26).

- b. They ask for a certificate.

In view of Ignorance's claim to close familiarity with the King, this was a most natural request to make. Those who know God will certainly have his certification (I John 3:24); those who are born of God will certainly have his birthmarks (I John 3:9-10; 5:1).

- (1) He fumbles.

This is a mock accident of the worst sort. It certainly betrays the weakness of Ignorance's supposed self-sufficiency. He well knows he has no such certificate, but he is too cowardly to admit his deficiency. This embarrassment is but the beginning of his humiliation

- (2) He is speechless.

Christian earlier denounced Mr. By-ends and his friends:

If these men cannot stand before the sentence of men, what will they do with the sentence of God? And if they are mute when dealt with by vessels of clay, what will they do when they shall be rebuked by the flames of devouring fire?¹⁰

Likewise with dumbstruck Ignorance here. Formerly articulate, now he is speechless with guilt (Matt. 22:12-13).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 136.

D. Ignorance is appointed to his own place.

So they told the *King*, but he would not come down to see him. Instead, he commanded the same two *Shining Ones*, who had previously conducted *Christian* and *Hopeful* to the *City*, to seize *Ignorance*, bind him hand and foot, and carry him away.¹¹ Then they took him up and carried him through the air to the door that I had earlier seen in the side of the *Hill* below the *Delectable Mountains*, and dispatched him there.¹²

The gatekeepers withdraw empty-handed to consult with the King and present this man's plea. Meanwhile, Ignorance stands outside the gate of heaven realizing that his moment of truth has come. Having vehemently argued his case before many men along the way, now his claim to a good heart will be judged by He who truly knows his heart, and there will be no further court of appeal.



Ignorance is
dispatched to
Hell

¹¹ Matt. 22:13.

¹² Rev. 20:11-15.

1. The King declares he will not come to meet the man.

Why? Because he has never had an intimate acquaintance with this man. His claim of friendship is bogus, his qualifications are lacking, his approach is out of order, and his heart is impure. Now the truth of Luke 13:24 is perfectly illustrated by Ignorance, as Spurgeon notes in his sermon based on this passage titled "Self-delusion."¹³ Again it becomes clear that the terms for reconciliation with God are for God to determine alone.

2. The King demands that he be bound and taken away.

Everything that Ignorance has possessed and accomplished in this earthly life has been left behind. Yet one thing of his remains with him, at least to this point, and that is his soul. But now even this is about to be lost in the sense that God has condemned him to both separation from the Celestial City and the torment of hell forever (Rev. 20:11-15). Bunyan comments on this condition:

There is no such loss, as to the nature of loss, as is the loss of the soul; for he that hath lost his soul has lost himself. . . . A man may lose his wife, his children, his estate, his liberty, and his life, and have all made up again. But when a man has lost himself, his soul, then all is gone to all intents and purposes.¹⁴

- a. He is restrained and transported away.

The irony is that the two messengers who escorted Christian and Hopeful to the Celestial City are appointed to take Ignorance away. While his binding signifies his criminal status, it was also considered necessary on account of the prisoner's self-righteous protestations. Now as he is in transit there are flashes before him of his life of futility.

- b. He is cast into the by-way to Hell.

Even Ignorance had been repulsed by the horror of this place when passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. But his point of entry will now be that place suitable for false professors, the small valley gate at the Delectable Mountains (Isa. 14:15). How terrible will be his remembrance of his closeness to heaven, his sensing of its glory, and yet his banishment to hell for all of eternity.

¹³ Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 8, p. 585.

¹⁴ Bunyan, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 119.

E. Bunyan's devastating conclusion.

Then I saw that there was a way to *Hell* even from the gates of *Heaven*, as well as from the *City of Destruction*.¹⁵ So I awoke, and behold it was a dream.

The concluding exhortation drawn from the lesson regarding Ignorance must surely rank as one of the most electrifying sentences in all of English literature. The wedding of truth with a touch of paradox simply cannot be ignored. It is sobering in the extreme while equally being rooted in truth. In this regard, the situation of Ignorance may be likened to that of Judas Iscariot who, having privileged access to the Son of God, yet upon hearing from Jesus' lips of his imminent betrayal, could with such hollow bewilderment declare, "Surely not I, Lord?" (Matt. 26:22). For Judas then as well, from the very presence of the Fountain of Life there was a way to the abyss of death.

1. The road to hell may pass the very gates of heaven.

The point is that a person may be in the close proximity of truth, and yet wholly be an alien to that truth; he may even recognize the truth, and yet for personal reasons preserve an aloofness to that truth. In a nominally Christian nation such as America, the possibility of such soul detachment, in spite of bodily proximity, is very real and widespread. It may be likened to "holding to a form of godliness" while "denying its power." Such people, like Ignorance, are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (II Tim. 3:5, 7).

2. The awakening of the dreamer ends the allegory.

The allegorist, as it were, awakens from his sleep. He rises from his pillow to continue his own pilgrimage, and yet seriously ponder what he has dreamt about. The whole story was not so fantastical after all. It was a dream about the deepest of realities, biblical reality, moral reality, eternal reality, soul reality. To hurriedly dispense of such matters, as if they were mere religious fantasy, is to truly live in an unreal world.

3. Application.

No better pressing home of the concluding truth here could be made than that which William Mason has left us. He exactly catches the intent of Bunyan when he tenderly exhorts the reader:

This is a most awful [full of awe] conclusion. Consider it deeply. Weigh it attentively, so as to get good satisfaction from the Word to these important questions:- Am I in Christ, the way, the only way, to the kingdom, or not? Do I see that all other ways, whether of sin or self-righteousness, lead to hell? Does Christ dwell in my heart by faith? Am I a new creature in him? Do I renounce my own righteousness, as well as abhor my sins? Do I look alone to Christ for righteousness, and depend only on him for holiness? Is he the only hope of my soul, and the only confidence of my heart? And do I desire to be found in him; knowing by the Word, and feeling by the teaching of his Spirit, that I am totally lost

¹⁵ Matt. 26:25.

in myself? Thus, is Christ formed in me, the only hope of glory? Do I study to please him, as well as hope to enjoy him? Is fellowship with God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ, so prized by me, as to seek it, and to esteem it above all things? If so, though I may find all things in nature, in the world, and from Satan, continually opposing this, yet I am in Christ the way, and he is in me the truth and the life.¹⁶



“So I awoke, and behold it was a dream.”

¹⁶ Bunyan, *Works*, Vol. III, p. 166.