**The City of Destruction**

Text: Acts 16:16-34

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 64; Acts 16:16-40

**Confession:** Heidelberg Catechism LD 3 Q&A 7-8, LD4 Q&A9-10

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘O God beyond all praising’, 51b, 458, 40, 466, 525

**Series:** The Pilgrim’s Progress (#1)

**Theme:** Paul and Silas are imprisoned in Philippi because they had cast out a demon from a slave girl who made her owners wealthy by fortune-telling. In the prison, as Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns a great earthquake shook the building, opening all doors and releasing the prisoners. The jailer asked what he needed to do to be saved and so Paul and Silas proclaimed the gospel to him and his household with the result that the jailer believed and was baptised, together with all his household.

**Proposition:** In our misery, God’s Word shows us the way of escape in Christ.

**Introduction**

‘*The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to that Which is to Come*’ is an allegory of the Christian Life, written in 1678 by John Bunyan. This 344-year-old piece of literature has never been out of print and has been translated into more than 200 languages. For many centuries it was the second most popular book in the English language; only the Bible was more widely read. I remember reading The Pilgrim’s Progress as a young boy; it was one of the books in our small library at home.

Have you read The Pilgrim’s Progress? If you have, then you are likely familiar with places like ‘the Slough of Despond’, ‘Doubting Castle’, and ‘The Celestial City’. You may well remember characters like ‘Christian’, ‘Mr Worldly Wiseman’, ‘Faithful’, ‘Pliable’, and ‘Evangelist’.

Charles Spurgeon once famously said of John Bunyan ‘*Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him*’. Pilgrim’s Progress is deeply rooted in Scripture and reflects some of the Biblical theology that we confess as a church.

It is our general practice in this church to focus on particular doctrines in Scripture during one of our services each Lord’s Day. Ordinarily we do this in the afternoon, but today, in the morning! Usually we follow the overall structure of one of the four Reformed Confessions that express the theology of the Bible (we have just completed the Canons of Dort). The series which we are beginning today focuses on doctrines of Scripture explained in these confessions, in the order they arise from the story of The Pilgrim’s Progress.

Today, we begin at the start, in the City of Destruction, where in a dream, author John Bunyan writes that he ‘*saw a man clothed with rags standing…a book in his hand and a great burden on his back*’. This man’s name is ‘Christian’. His journey represents the Christian life. Starting with our text in Acts chapter 16, we are going to see the misery of Christian and the way of escape under these three points:

1. Clothed in rags
2. Heavily burdened
3. Carrying a book
4. **Clothed in rags**

Have you ever felt miserable? Misery is ‘a state of feeling great physical or mental distress or discomfort’. We often feel miserable when we are sick, in pain, grief, despair, or conflict. The first part of the Heidelberg Catechism (beginning after the introduction in Lord’s Day 1) is entitled “Man’s Misery”. It is only when people like you and I come to realise our miserable state before God that we desire to find a way of escape.

The Philippian Jailer in our text was so miserable that he was ‘about to kill himself’ with his own sword (Acts 16:27). Why? Because he thought that he would be executed for letting the captives in his prison escape (ref. Acts 12:19). Jailers in Roman cities were often retired soldiers who would have been trained in the military ideals of duty and discipline. Suicide was considered an honourable course of action when compared to execution for disloyal service. A great earthquake had shaken the ‘foundations of the prison’ so that ‘*immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s bonds were unfastened*’ (Acts 16:26).

Paul and Silas had been severely beaten and then held in captivity in Philippi because they had cast out a demon from a slave girl who been making her owners wealthy by fortune-telling. It was as Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns in the inner prison with their feet held fast in stocks that the great earthquake shook the building, opening all doors and releasing the prisoners.

As the jailer drew his sword to take his own life, Paul cried out ‘*Do not harm yourself, for we are all here*’ (v28). Scripture does not reveal the details of what was taking place in the heart of this jailer. This would certainly have been a very traumatic experience for him. The Jailer, trembling with fear, fell down before Paul and Silas. Then, bringing them out, he said "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" (v30). Exactly what he understood in asking this question is unclear. It is possible that the Jailer had previously heard the fortune-telling slave girl who had been crying out publicly, saying about Paul and Silas "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation*" (v17).

This Jailer was fearful and miserable, like the character ‘Christian’ in The Pilgrim’s Progress. Christian had been born in the City of Destruction and was clothed in rags – a reference to Isaiah 64:6 “*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away*” (Isa 64:6). Christian, like the Philippian Jailer, like John Bunyan, like you and me, had been conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5). This naturally corrupt nature is one that we all share - as described in HCLD3A7: “*From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. This fall has so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners—corrupt from conception on*”.

The author of The Pilgrim’s Progress was born in 1628 to Thomas and Margaret Bunyan in Elstow, Bedfordshire, England. The journey that Christian makes from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City mirrors the experience of John Bunyan. The Pilgrim’s progress is very much an autobiographical work. John Bunyan said of himself *‘I had few equals for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the Holy name of God’.* Bunyan was, as you and I are in our fallen natures also, in the words of Heidelberg Catechism Q8 ‘inclined towards all evil’.

Then Bunyan came under conviction of sin, but he could not yet see the solution. He expresses this through the character of Christian who says, “*I am for certain informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven; in which fearful overthrow both myself, with thee my wife, and you my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin, except (the which yet I see not) some way of escape be found whereby we may be delivered*”. The City of Destruction represents the unbelieving world. God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

In his misery, the character Christian saw a man named Evangelist who came to him and showed him that he must leave the City of Destruction and thereby ‘*flee from the wrath to come*’ (Matt 3:7). This was difficult for him to do, because he was so heavily burdened, as we’ll see in our second point:

1. **Heavily burdened**

Perhaps you, like me, have been tramping with a very heavy pack. It is very tiring and uncomfortable carrying a big load. In Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian starts with a ‘*great burden on his back*’. This is an image of the oppressive weight of sin, shame and guilt that results from sin. David expresses this vividly in Psalm 38 “*For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me*’ (v4). Tramping can be very unpleasant and challenging when you have got a big pack on your back and the track is covered in deep heavy mud in which your feet get stuck and moving forward is very hard.

So it was for Christian who ‘drew nigh to a very miry slough’; the name of which was ‘The Slough of Despond’. ‘Slough’ is an old English word meaning ‘a swamp - a place of deep mud’. To be despondent is to feel a profound hopelessness, dejection, discouragement or gloom. Bunyan writes that ‘*because of the burden that was on his back, Christian began to sink in the mire*’. In ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’ Christian struggles alone in the muddy bog.

He had felt increasingly isolated in the City of Destruction because his neighbours there mocked him for leaving, others threatened him, some cried after him to return. However, two residents of the City of Destruction resolved to travel with him with the aim of bringing him back by force. Their names were Obstinate and Pliable. To be obstinate is to stubbornly refuse to change your opinion or chosen course of action, despite attempts to persuade you to do so. When Obstinate tried to persuade Christian to turn back, he explained that he was seeking an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that would not fade away (1 Pet 1:4-6; Heb 9:6,16). Eventually Obstinate turned back, declaring ‘*I will be no companion of such misled fantastical fellows*’.

To be pliable is to be easily influenced or controlled by others. Pliable stayed with Christian until they reached the miry bog when he began to be offended and angrily said ‘*Is this the happiness you have told me all this while of? If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect betwixt this and our journey’s end*’. Pliable had not expected travelling the way of salvation to be so tough. He was looking for an easy path. It was then that Pliable climbed out of the Slough of Despond on the side nearest to the City of Destruction and went back to his own house.

In contrast to weak pliable, Christian persisted and struggled on to the other side, but could not get out because of the heavy burden on his back. He was then assisted by the character ‘Help’ who ‘*drew him out, and set him upon solid ground, and bid him go his way*’. This is a reference to Psalm 40.2 “*He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure*”. The character of ‘Help’ here represents the kind, compassionate, gracious, Living God. Christian had been delivered from deep despondency.

In our text from Acts 16, Paul and Silas could easily have become despondent, discouraged and despairing. Like Bunyan’s fictitious character Christian, they had been ill-treated by the townsfolk of Philippi who ‘*dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers*’ (Acts 16:19). The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. Then they were thrown into prison with their feet fastened in stocks. This was how convicted criminals were treated – with their ankles held fast in wooden boards. Paul and Silas’ situation was bleak, uncomfortable and uncertain. Yet ‘*about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God*’ (v25).

Bunyan’s Christian went through the Slough of Despond before the burden was lifted from his back – that was his own personal experience of conversion. People like you and me, both as seekers of the Lord and also as those who have followed Christ for many a year, can fall into despondency. Many saints have been there before us; spending time in the ‘miry bog’ of despair. Perhaps this is your situation in life today?

There is a misery that comes when the Lord opens our eyes through His Word as the HCLD2Q&A3 explains: How do you come to know your misery? The law of God tells me (‘*through the law comes knowledge of sin*’ Rom 3:20b). The way of escape from this misery is to seek the way of salvation, as the Philippian Jailer did, as Christian did, and as all of us here who profess saving faith have done.

There is also potential for misery as we walk with the Lord and experience what James refers to as ‘*trials of various kinds*’ (James 1:2). These are experiences that are generally unpleasant, sometimes very painful at the time, but they result in greater steadfastness of faith if we persevere (James 1:25). Remember how much Paul suffered as he followed Christ. Frequently imprisoned with countless beatings, stoned, shipwrecked three times, in danger, in toil and hardship, hungry and thirsty, in cold and exposure (from 2 Cor 11:23-28). Through Paul’s experiences of suffering prior to the prison in Philippi, the Lord had prepared him so that he could be joyful in very difficult circumstances.

Brothers and sisters, these things ‘*were written down for our instruction*’ (1 Cor 10:11). We should not be surprised when the going gets tough in the Christian life. Just as Bunyan’s character ‘Help’ showed Christian the way out and forward, so Paul and Silas showed the Philippian Jailer the way of escape. Ironic that the keeper of the jail needed to be set free! Luke records that Paul and Silas ‘*spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house*’(v32). This brings us to our third point:

1. **Carrying a book**

In John Bunyan’s opening description of the man he will later identify as the pilgrim ‘Christian’ he writes: “*I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back*”. The book, of course, represents the Bible. Just as Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to the Philippian Jailer, so the fictitious character Evangelist explains the Word of God to Christian.

It is the Word of God that reveals the just response of God to the sin which is naturally present in all the descendants of Adam, as the HCLD4Q&A10 explains, asking the question “*Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?*”. Then giving the answer “*Certainly not. He is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity*”.

In The Pilgrim’s Progress it is the character Evangelist who directs Christian to keep the shining light in his eye – a reference to Psalm 119:105 (“*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*”) so that He will find the ‘Wicket-gate’. The ‘Wicket-gate’ is the subject of the next sermon in this series and mirrors the words of Christ in Matthew 7:13-14: "*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few*”. It is clear from Scripture that the Philippian Jailer entered by the ‘narrow gate’, thereby escaping the destruction of God’s judgement.

After Paul and Silas had spoken the gospel to the Jailer and his household, Luke writes in the book of Acts that: “*He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God*” (v33-34). The Jailer bathed the wounds of the two evangelists and then he and his household were bathed in the waters of baptism. The early church Father Chrysostom said of the saved Jailer “*He washed and was washed*”.

Notice that the response of the Jailer to the gospel was four-fold:

1. **Faith** – he believed in God. He believed in the way of salvation that Paul and Silas taught him. This way is through the ‘narrow gate’, Christ Himself is this gate or door (John 10:7). Jesus truly said "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6).
2. **Service** – he washed the wounds that Paul and Silas had received through being seized, dragged, beaten with rods and put into the stocks. He received them into his house and set food before them.
3. **Baptism** – the outward washing with water as commanded by Christ in Matt 28:19-20a: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*”.
4. **Rejoicing –** salvation in Christ is a cause of exceeding joy!

Notice that not only the Jailer, but also his household were baptised. Paul and Silas had said to him: "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*" (v31). The Greek word translated ‘believe’ is in the singular, not the plural. So does this mean that his whole household (family and any servants/slaves) would automatically be saved if the Jailer came to faith? No. saving faith is personal and individual and cannot be ‘transferred’ to anyone else in order to save them. “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36). In ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’, Christian could not save his wife and children. Their journey of faith is covered separately by the second part of Bunyan’s book.

We know that all the Jailers household rejoiced that he had believed (v34). What is not clear is whether or not some others or everyone in his home also believed. It is also not clear whether or not there were young children in his family at that time. Those who are convinced that baptism is only for believers will assume that there were no children present. Those who are convinced that baptism is also for the children of believing parent or parents will say that there were most likely children in the Jailer’s household. One Bible commentator (J.A. Alexander) has helpfully said ‘*what is most important is to settle this disputed question (about the baptism of children) upon other grounds and higher priorities, and then explain these historical details accordingly*’. I would say that the baptism of the Philippian Jailer’s entire household is highly suggestive of the inclusion of child baptisms.

With infant baptism, the message is not that the sins of the person being baptised have been washed away through Jesus Christ, but that baptised children belong in the covenant community where the washing of sins away by Christ is taught and demonstrated in the life of the church.

The Heidelberg Catechism LD27 answer 74 explains this theology in these words: *“Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism”.*

After proclaiming the gospel to the Philippian Jailer and his household, Paul and Silas left and travelled on through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. In The Pilgrims’ Progress, Christian travels on towards the Wicket-gate. Today you and I, brothers and sisters continue our ‘pilgrimage’ towards the day when we shall see Christ our Lord face to face. The gate to eternal life is ‘narrow’ (only through faith in Christ) and the way is hard (there are times of difficulty and despondency). Yet God helps those who travel this way by providing light for their path through His Word (Ps 119:105).

Unbelieving friend, will you too flee the wrath to come? Do you see that all your ‘righteous deeds’ are like a polluted garment before God? Do you feel the burden of sin, guilt and shame before the Holy One? Will you also come to Jesus and believe, as the Philippian Jailer did?

AMEN.