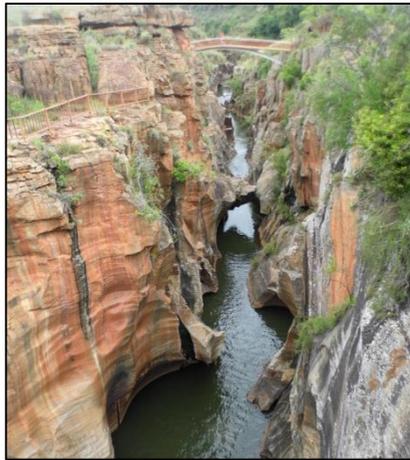


A devotional guide for Little Pilgrims Progress

*Helping parents to teach and train their
children*



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FOREWORD

This devotional guide for parents is based on H.L. Taylor's adaptation of Pilgrim's Progress for children, entitled *Little Pilgrims Progress* (by Moody Publishers). However, because this devotional guide is based on the main story and characters of Pilgrim's Progress, the original work or any faithful adaption of the original can also be used. In this guide the chapters correspond to the chapters of Taylor's version of Little Pilgrim's Progress.

Bunyan wrote Pilgrim's Progress while he was in prison for preaching the gospel. He wrote it to strengthen his congregation, who were left without a pastor, and it contains often serious themes to strengthen believers during times of trial and difficulty. It is therefore not just a "nice story" with some vague lessons to be learnt. It contains some very deep spiritual truths.

This version of Little Pilgrim's Progress has been adapted for children, while retaining all the essential themes of the original. The language has been modernised and simplified (the original was written in the 17th century). Some of the language in Little Pilgrim's Progress is still somewhat archaic, and my wife and I have substituted more modern language as we read the story to our children. For example, we used "heavenly" instead of "celestial" throughout.

As a father, I did not shy away from some of the more difficult themes when going through the book with my children. Some of

these themes include the cost of discipleship, the reality of God's coming day of judgement, sin, hell, and the warning not to love the world or the things of the world. Our children need to hear such biblical themes from an early age, so that they don't fall into what John Piper calls the casual, hip-hop, superficial Christian culture that pervades much of affluent Western society.

Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory, which means most of the characters and events are not incidental. They are there to reveal biblical truths. There are a lot of lessons to be found in the book, but we have tried to extract the most important ones for our children. This devotional guide reflects these main lessons. We have therefore not been too pedantic in trying to identify exactly who or what Bunyan was targeting. For example, in chapter five, Worldly could represent nominal clergy, or nominal Christians in general. I have tried to identify the general error and warning that Bunyan was trying to highlight, and not get too involved in the debate as to whether it was some particular individual or the general error that Bunyan was warning against.

Little Pilgrim's Progress is obviously not inspired as is the Bible, so we always made sure that when we went through the Little Pilgrim's Progress with our children, we used verses from the Bible to show that the truth being taught in the book was in fact correct and biblical.

We advise that when reading Little Pilgrim's Progress with your children, you be alert to the spiritual themes as they arise in your heart. This guide will help you get started, and suggest some of the main themes. But there is no substitute for the Holy Spirit working through you as parents to deal with themes that are relevant to

your children in the circumstances in which find yourselves as a family.

As a general approach, we would read a chapter at a time, and then ask our children what they thought about the different characters, or what the events meant, and then asked them how they thought it applied to them. Where we have not suggested specific questions in a chapter, we advise that you ask your children basic questions such as: Who are the characters in this chapter and what/who do they represent? How do these lessons apply to you?

God bless you richly as you seek to raise your children in the ways of God. Don't forget to pray that God would bless these lessons to your children's hearts and minds.

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CHAPTER 1

Theme 1: The coming day of judgement.

General

The City of Destruction represents the world that faces the coming day of judgement. This was a key theme of the Lord Jesus in the New Testament (NT). See for example Matthew 10:15, Matthew 12:36 and John 5:27. There is a coming day of judgement, on which every person will give an account to God (Rom. 14:12). It must always be remembered that the main reason why Christ came to earth was to save people from God's anger directed at their sin (1Thess. 1:10).

Application for our children

Our children need to be aware of the urgency of turning to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith, because God is coming in anger and judgement to a sinful world. It is never too early to become a Christian, and the urgency of turning to Christ must be impressed on our children. Christ will come as a thief in the night (2 Pet. 3:10), and our children must never be left with the impression that they have ample time to make up their minds. Today is the day of salvation (Heb. 3:12-13)!

We therefore asked our children if they know that God was angry with sin and sinners. This is not a popular theme today, with God generally being portrayed as loving and kind, but never judging people.

Theme 2: The world

General

Little Christian's friends represent the world. The world mocks people who take God, sin and the coming judgement seriously. The world does not encourage true godliness. The Bible often speaks of people in the world persecuting believers and mocking those who follow Christ. Please note, that although "Little Christian" is called "Little Christian" at this stage, he has not yet become a Christian. This happens in chapter 11 when little Christian comes to the cross and loses his burden. Here Little Christian is someone who is coming under the conviction of sin (which is absolutely essential to becoming a Christian) and under the conviction of God's existence and His coming judgement on the world.

Application for our children

Our children need to be taught that they will be mocked for following Christ at some stage of their lives. They need to accept this as part of the cost of following Christ (Luke 14:25-33). They should expect it. It is also important to prepare them for the excuses the friends of Little Christian give for not paying attention to the coming destruction. The friends said that it won't happen (see 2 Pet. 3:1-4), or that they should play while they have time (i.e. "eat, drink and be merry" – see Luke 12:19). We discussed these excuses with our children, and that they can expect some of their friends at school to start saying similar things. They should, however, not be deterred from following Christ by mocking people or by thinking the excuses they make are valid.

Theme 3: The Bible

General

The book that Little Christian finds represents the Bible. Our children need to be taught the importance of knowing, reading and trusting the Bible. It is directly inspired by God (2Tim. 3:16), and our ONLY sure and infallible guide of spiritual truth. It is very important to understand the sufficiency of Scripture. Many people today look for a special “word from the Lord” to make decisions and guide them in life. This is very precarious, as these forms of guidance are not infallible, and many mistakes have been made from “impressions” which may or may not be aligned with God’s will. Scripture, on the other hand, provides sure knowledge and guidance. Note carefully what 2 Timothy 3:16 says. The BIBLE is sufficient to equip the man (or woman) of God “for every good work.” The Bible gives us explicit commands, instructions, wisdom and general principles upon which we can make every decision we need to in life. We don’t need anything else but the Bible for daily living and decision-making. Notice that when the Lord Jesus was tempted by Satan, He quoted and trusted in Scripture to guide Him into God’s perfect will (Matt. 4:1-10).

This does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not guide us in subjective ways. But the point is that these subjective ways are never to be placed alongside, or used as a substitute for, the infallible word of God. We must always go the Bible first to look for truth and principles to guide us.

Application for our children

Our children need to be encouraged to love the Bible. It teaches us about God and salvation. It equips us for good works. It gives us practical guidance. When we are converted, God gives us a love for

the truth (2 Thess. 2:10), and a love for His word (Ps. 119:140). If there is no love for God's word in people, then it is doubtful that conversion has taken place. However, Bible reading is also a Christian discipline, and children should cultivate a habit of Bible reading, even though they may not always feel like it. The more their minds are filled with God's word, the more their lives will be aligned with God's will.

In this regard, don't forget the importance of Scripture memorisation. From the age of two we started getting our children to memorise key verses. We wrote out Bible verses with pictures in place of key words (e.g. a picture of a globe instead of "world," a heart in the place of "love") so they could "read" these verses before being able to properly "read." By the time they were four or five, they had memorised forty to fifty key verses or short passages. Our prayer is that these verses will remain in our children's hearts and minds for the rest of their lives.

Theme 4: The necessity of evangelism and missions

General

The serious-but-kind men and women represent evangelists and missionaries. The Bible is clear that people cannot be saved without hearing the gospel and consciously believing in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:13-15). God's general revelation through creation, while revealing some aspects of His nature and attributes (Rom. 1:20), is not sufficient to save people. They need special revelation (the gospel – see Rom. 1:16-17). It is therefore critical that the Bible is translated into local languages, and that preachers and

missionaries are sent out to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ.

Application for our children

We spoke to our girls of the need to preach the gospel to the lost world, and the very important role of us financially supporting missionaries and full-time evangelists. We also emphasized the joy and duty of spreading the gospel ourselves. This also started a conversation with our children about tithing and giving to the church. As they grow up, they must always be good stewards of their money, and see giving as a priority, joy and privilege. It should be the first thing we do when we earn money (or get pocket money), not the last. It also means that we need to plan and budget to give to God's work, even if it means going without new clothes or a larger television. Further conversations can also be had with your children about that which competes for our money, namely materialism. New toys, clothes and possessions always seem so exciting and essential for happiness, but soon they lie discarded or broken, and we have a feeling of emptiness. When similar things happen to our children and their toys, they can be used as lessons that materialism never truly satisfies us. Giving to God's work, on the other hand, produces real joy in our hearts, and also has the promise of eternal rewards (Matt. 6:19-24).

It may be that some of our children will become missionaries themselves. We can encourage them that this is a worthy calling, and something they must be open to as they grow up.

CHAPTER 2

Theme 1: Sin

General

The burden of Little Christian represents our consciousness of our sin. This is essential to become a Christian (1 John 1:8-2:2). After all, Christ died on the cross for our sins, and invites those who labour and are heavy laden to come to Him for rest (Matt. 11:25ff). The work of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of our sins (John 16:8), and so we flee to Christ for salvation.

Application for our children

We spoke to our children about the various ways people try and get rid of guilt and sin (e.g. go to psychologists to pacify them in their sin, to excuse their sin, to blame someone else, or to deny their sin exists). These people become hardened in sin and lose their awareness of their guilt. This is a very serious and dangerous position to be in. The only way to deal with our sin is to confess it, repent of it and go to Christ for Him to wash us and cleanse us as a free gift. Feelings of guilt are not pleasant, but a reality that we need to face so that it drives us to Christ. We even told our children to feel sorry for friends who seem to have no sense of sin and guilt, as they will have no interest in Christ. It is a blessing from God to be aware of our sin.

It is therefore important to be praying with your children, and to teach them every day to confess their specific sins before God (Matt. 6:12).

Theme 2: the one and only true religion

General

Little Christian is pointed to a narrow gate as the way to the heavenly city. The Lord Jesus spoke plainly about the true gospel and biblical truth being a narrow gate (Matt. 7:13). There is only one way to God, and this is through the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Other religions do not worship the same God merely using different names. All religious paths do not lead to heaven, however sincere people may be. Becoming a Christian means turning away from and renouncing other religions (1 Pet. 1:18; Rom. 1:18-23), and clinging to the historically unique Person of Jesus Christ.

Application for our children

We spoke earnestly to our girls about the wide gate that leads to destruction that MANY go through. We spoke about false religions and false spirituality. We spoke about the Lord Jesus being the only way to God, and the only name given under heaven and earth by which our sins can be forgiven. Islam, Buddhism, Jehovah's witnesses, Mormons and other religions and cults are not other ways to God just using different names for God. They are false gospels and false religions that cannot save. We made our girls aware that there are false teachings in the world, and they need to love and cling to the truth that is in Christ Jesus.

CHAPTER 3 AND 4

Theme 1: temporary “believers”

General

Pliable and Obstinate represent two sins / character flaws that can stop people from becoming Christians. These two relate directly to the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23). Obstinate just refuses to believe the truth, refuses to acknowledge sin, and turns away from the gospel (represented by the seed that gets eaten by the birds – Matt. 13:18). Pliable’s weakness is more subtle, as he seems to be initially swayed by the truth. But Pliable’s name indicates that because he has no courage, conviction or determination, he is soon going to turn away. Pliable is one of those people who hears the word and receives it with joy (initially), but then turns away when difficulties arise (Matt. 13:20-21). The slough of despond represents despair or depression arising from a difficulty. Bunyan was pointing to emotional or physical trials that people can go through that could either hinder them from becoming Christians, or turn them back from continuing to follow after Christ.

It is critical here to recognise that the Bible teaches that true believers cannot lose their salvation (John 10:28-30; Rom. 8:28-30; Phil. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:5). Those who initially seem to be Christians but then turn away were never true believers (1 John 2:19). True faith endures trials and difficulties to the end (1 Pet. 1:6-8).

Application for our children

We asked our girls what made the difference between Pliable and Little Christian. We explained that Pliable did not feel his sin, and hence was only seeing Christianity as something of interest. He was not determined and committed to get rid of his sin. We made our

girls aware of the fact that many children brought up in Christian homes drift away from Christianity when they get older. Our children must be aware of this danger, and they must make sure that they are determined and committed to follow Christ all the days of their lives. Many do not have true faith, and have only a “speculative interest” or “curiosity” about Christianity. But when trials come, or worldly temptations, they turn away from Christ. Hence again the importance of making sure we are coming to Christ to find peace with God and the forgiveness of *sins*. If we are coming to Christ because we think he is going to make us rich, take away all our problems, make us healthy or give us an easy life, then when these things don’t happen we turn away from Christianity and say “it didn’t work for me.” Christ has not promised us an easy, comfortable life. He rather promises to be with us during our trials. Only those with a true conviction of sin remain committed to Christ through thick and thin. They are seeking forgiveness of sins and peace with God (not health and wealth), and so it does not deter them if they are poor or plagued with disease and difficulties.

We also told our girls that God has a very clear purpose in trials - to strengthen us, make us trust Him more, and to test the genuineness of our faith (James 1:2-4). And so we spoke to our girls about expecting trials and trusting Christ through them. The Christian life is not easy, and they must be prepared for some hardship. However, the Christian life is still a blessed and joyful life.

CHAPTER 5

Theme 1: the faithfulness of God

General

God always helps his children. In this chapter, Help represents God's ever-present help in times of need. Consider Psalm 23. God is our Shepherd. He knows everything about us and everything we are going through. We need to trust Him in the difficulties of everyday life and the trials that He puts us through. God's rod and staff in Psalm 23 represent protection and guidance. What an amazing, blessed life the Christian has – that Almighty God would stoop to be our Shepherd. We cannot be more safe and secure in the arms of our Father. None of little Christian's friends had this comfort, protection and care, living in the City of Destruction. They only had the certain expectation of coming judgement.

Application for our children

We need to encourage our children to actively trust in God for the difficulties they are facing (with friends at school, peer pressure, problems with teachers, etc). After reading this chapter, ask your children what they are worried about, and pray with them about it (Phil. 4:6). They need to get into the habit of actively and consistently taking their problems and anxieties to God in prayer.

A related theme is that we are never too young to become Christians, because no matter what our age, God is able to watch over us and take care of us. So we emphasised to our girls that they need to trust in Christ even though they are young. Our girls seemed to have a concern: when they were young they told us they were afraid to become Christians at an early age in case they turned away from God. They wanted to wait until they were older.

We encouraged them with the truth that God watches us and protects us, no matter what our age. Christianity is not for “older people.” In addition, we don’t know how many days God has given us to live. Our children should therefore let nothing hinder them from becoming Christians at any age.

CHAPTER 6 AND 7

Theme 1: Nominal Christians

General

Even in Bunyan's day there was a group of people who were nominally Christian, represented by Worldly. This group is much larger today. Western churches are filled with people who attend church, have a Christian vocabulary, but are not committed to Christ, and don't believe that they need to fuss too much about their sin. They rather believe that by religious living ("being a good person"), attending church, and giving some money to the church they can win God's favour and so get to heaven. This is a "modified" form of legalism, where people try to get to heaven by doing some religious duties or by introducing some moral reforms, but essentially they want to continue to live a life with themselves at the centre. In these two chapters, the image of the terrible path with rocks and the flames of fire are drawn from Moses and Mt Sinai. Essentially, Worldly represents people trying to get into heaven by doing a few religious works (based on a modified version of law-keeping). Very importantly, Worldly advocates a way to heaven that by-passes the narrow gate and the cross of Christ.

The Bible is clear that we cannot get to heaven by our religious works (Gal. 2:16). Good works are important, but only as evidence that our faith is genuine and that we have already been truly converted (James 2:18; Matt. 7:15-20). We can only get to heaven when we renounce our self-righteousness, and receive the perfect righteousness of Christ (Phil. 3:7-9).

Application for our children

We emphasised here to our girls the real danger of self-righteousness and “religion” that does not start with a change of heart and does not rely totally on the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. The following points must be emphasised:

- (i) We cannot save ourselves – we need someone to save us. Only Christ can do this for us. There is no by-passing coming to the cross of Christ, confessing our sins, and casting ourselves upon Him for salvation. On the cross, the Lord Jesus actually paid the price for our sins (Isa. 53; Rom. 3:23-26) and gave Himself as a sacrifice to God. By trusting in Christ, our sins are washed away and we receive Christ’s righteousness and salvation as a free gift.
- (ii) The commitment to become a Christian is a life changing one –we become new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17) and our hearts are changed. We don’t just continue to live our lives as we used to (with just a little “religiosity” added to it).
- (iii) A genuine faith results in a transformed life with good works following (as the Puritans used to say – we are not saved by our good works, but we are not saved without them). In other words, good works (fruit) is the outflow of a genuine faith and evidence that a person is saved. This distinction is critical.

CHAPTER 8

Theme 1: Accepting the truth of the gospel

General

It is only in chapter 11 that Little Christian comes to the cross and his burden is removed. Here Bunyan portrays Christian entering the narrow gate. This most likely represents a person accepting the truth of the gospel (the narrow way which leads to life), and accepting that there are no other paths to heaven. Two points need to be noted.

Firstly, becoming a Christian does include knowing and accepting truth. There is a mental side to it – it is not just blind faith. This is abundantly clear from the fact that:

- (i) The Bible contains both teaching and objective truth that needs to be understood with our minds.
- (ii) The Apostle Paul continually REASONS with us in his epistles – he expects us to use our minds and think!

Secondly, the gospel sounds very arrogant – there is only one way to God, that that one way is only found in the Bible. This single path to heaven is centred on Christ (John 14:6) – there is no other name under heaven and earth by which we may be saved (Acts 4:12). Jesus Christ is exclusive, and Christianity is the one and only true religion.

The world will certainly condemn this as very narrow, unloving and arrogant – and there can be a temptation to be ashamed of it (Rom. 1:16-17). Yet it is what the Bible teaches, and it is the truth.

Application for our children

We went through the above verses with our children, and taught them that Jesus was the only way to God, and that there is one true God, and no other true religion. Our children need to embrace Christ as their only hope.

Our children also need to understand that the world (including some of their teachers and friends) will ridicule them and accuse them of being “narrow, unloving and judgemental.” Yet this is part of the cost of being a disciple of Christ. Christ was rejected for speaking the truth, because at the end of the day the world loves darkness (John 3:19-21).

Theme 2: The kindness of God

General

In this chapter, Bunyan emphasises the wonderful promises of God. Above the arch of the narrow gate is a verse that promises that to those who knock, it will be opened. The free offer of the gospel and the gracious promises of God should never become mundane to us. God promises that to everyone who asks, seeks and knocks, it will be given or opened (Matt. 7:7-9). The one who comes to Christ will never be turned away (John 6:37). This is especially important when people come under conviction of sin, and feel their guilt and debt to God. They then need reassurance that God will receive them when they come to Him in repentance and faith.

Application for our children

Our children need to be constantly reminded of the kindness and goodness of God, especially as they are growing up, and making mistakes. They need to know that they can flee to Christ for

forgiveness, and that God will not just grudgingly receive them and forgive them. Rather, through Christ, He receives them with open arms. It is useful to focus on the parable of the prodigal son (to illustrate the point) and emphasise how the father (representing God) runs out to receive his son that had rebelled but is now returning.

We spoke openly and honestly to our children about how their lives may turn out. They may make serious moral mistakes as they grow up. They may feel guilt and unworthiness for some of the things they have already done or will do. But they need to know that because of the wonderful work of Christ on the cross, and God's kindness and goodness, they need not run away from God, but rather run to Him. They can be assured of His love and acceptance when they do so. Emphasise and repeat this truth to your children, as our natural reaction when we sin is to run away from God!

CHAPTER 9

Theme 1: The role of the Holy Spirit

General

The Interpreter most likely refers to the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The Holy Spirit opens our hearts and minds to receive spiritual truth (Acts 16:14; 1Cor 2:10). In this regard, it is critical to note that the natural mind (unassisted by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit) cannot receive or understand spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:13-14). Sin and Satan has blinded mankind (2 Cor. 3:14; 2 Cor. 4:4). Ezekiel 36:26-27 indicates that God must give us a new heart, and place His Spirit within us, so that we can walk in His ways and obey His commands. This “new heart” is described as the new birth in John 3.

It is therefore clear that God must initiate the work of salvation in a person’s life through the new birth before he or she can obey the gospel. Romans 10:16 and 2 Thessalonians 1:8 show that belief in Christ is considered as an act of obedience, and as such, an unregenerate sinner cannot do this before the new birth. The modern notion that a person believes and then gets born again is therefore incorrect and misunderstands the serious condition that original sin brings about in our lives. The Lord Jesus is clear that nobody “can” (the verse does not say “may”) come to Him apart from the Father drawing them (John 6:44, 64-65). In other words, sinners lack the ability to come to Christ unless God works in their lives first.

Application for our children

Our children need to understand their dependence on the Holy Spirit to correctly understand the Bible, and to bear fruit to God. “Self-dependence” in the Christian life can only breed pride and hypocrisy. Both adults and children alike should have a conscious, daily attitude of dependence on the Holy Spirit. We also got our children to memorise Galatians 5:22-23, as a reminder that any fruit in their lives comes from the power of the Holy Spirit.

Theme 2: Christ our Shepherd

General

In this chapter, Bunyan emphasises Christ as our good Shepherd. The Christian life is meant to be lived with our eyes firmly fixed on the Saviour (Heb. 12:1-2). We trust in His blood to remove our sin. We look to Him for protection and guidance. He is our Lord, our King and our Friend. John 10 is the classic passage on the good shepherd, and the various roles He plays in our life.

Application for our children

We need to teach our children to be Christ-centred: to trust in Christ for protection, to look to His example in persevering through trials, to plead His blood for the forgiveness of sins, and to constantly go back to His word to obtain wisdom and guidance. This is a daily pursuit, and includes prayer, bible reading and attending church.

CHAPTER 10

Theme 1: Having our treasures in heaven

General

In this chapter, Passion and Patience contrast unbelievers with believers. The Bible indicates that Christians live as aliens and pilgrims in this world (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 2:11). We often have to give up and sacrifice present comforts, opportunities and wealth in order to store up future treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21). Some believers have suffered the loss of all their worldly goods for the sake of the kingdom (Heb. 10:32-35). Importantly, we are told in this Hebrews passage that the reason the believers accepted this trial with joy was because they looked to their future reward in heaven. As another example, Moses gave up great wealth to suffer with God's people, "for he looked to the reward" (Heb. 11:24-26).

Application for our children

We taught our children two main truths in regard to this theme. Firstly, the things of this world do not satisfy us for long. As mentioned previously, toys and clothes that once promised such excitement and fulfilment lie broken or discarded in the bottom of their cupboards. That which was new and exciting has now become old and mundane. Notice that Passion has got to be satisfied "here and now," with the ominous warning by Bunyan that it won't last long. Patience, on the other hand, is prepared to sacrifice some of the present enjoyments for future, true and enduring rewards.

Secondly, our hearts need to be in heaven with God, where our true treasure lies. These rewards will never fade away, be stolen, or grow old and mundane. These glorious rewards cannot be

compared to the fading pleasures of the present life. But it takes faith and confidence in God's promises to give up present-day "things" (that seem so attractive and alluring) for promises of future reward. One way we encouraged our children to actively practice this was to give up some of their pocket money or toys for God's kingdom by giving them to others with greater need.

Theme 2: Taking the kingdom of God by violence

General

The Brave Soldier represents all God's people who need to "strive to enter the narrow gate" (Luke 13:22). The word "strive" means to exert oneself strenuously. Notice that Bunyan indicates that God could easily have removed the danger and obstacles to entering the palace, but He rather keeps them there to see who truly wants to enter the kingdom. This closely resembles the teaching of the Lord Jesus that there is a cost to becoming a Christian (Luke 14:27-29).

Application for our children

It is important to teach our children that God wants us to be earnest and zealous Christians. The easy-believism of our day (where people want the benefits of heaven without wanting to give up anything here on earth) only produces church-going people who have no zeal or gritty determination to serve God "no matter what it takes." Being salt and light in this dark world means Christians must have the courage and conviction to be able to stand against the prevailing, worldly standards and attitudes. We reminded our children that even in the present day, there are countries where Christians are persecuted, and the decision to become a Christian

almost certainly results in loss of family and support, and often in loss of life.

CHAPTER 11

Theme 1: Glorifying in the cross of Christ

General

In this chapter, Little Christians comes to the cross, experiences the joy and relief of having his burden (sin) removed, and contemplates what the King's Son did on the cross for him. The aspects of the cross that Bunyan emphasises are very important, and ties up with the teaching of the Bible. It provides a healthy antidote to the current teaching in some circles:

- (i) The cross primarily deals with sin. The Lord Jesus came to die in the place of sinners, to remove their sin, so that they could stand guiltless before a holy, just God (Rom. 3:21-26). In contrast, many today teach a "health, wealth and prosperity gospel," where physical sickness or poverty is seen as the main problem of man. This is completely wrong.
- (ii) The cross results in peace with God. The Bible indicates that God is our enemy because of the guilt of our sin (Rom. 1:18ff), and the cross removes our sin and establishes peace with God (Rom. 5:1). The "enemy" the cross destroyed was not tyrannical governments or injustice.
- (iii) The cross is therefore a real, objective sacrifice that Christ offered on the cross to take away our sins and to create peace with God (Heb. 7:26-28; 9:26-28; 10:11-14). The cross was merely a display of sacrificial love (to soften our hearts) or to merely give us an example of how to live. It was a real sacrifice.

Application for our children

It is critical that we teach our children exactly what happened on the cross. Yes, we have to teach them some “theology” and Bible verses so they can correctly understand what God was doing on the cross. This is critical for them, so they can know that their salvation is based on a real, objective work Christ wrought on the cross. Their standing before God is not based, in the first instance, on their current emotional or spiritual state. Their acceptance before God is based on the work of Christ, which was perfect, final and complete. This can especially help our children through the often emotionally turbulent time that they experience as they mature and grow into adulthood.

It is also important for our children to appreciate the great love and kindness of God shown towards us on the cross (John 3:16). He punished His Son in our place so we could be freed from sin and judgement (Isa. 53:4-6). There is no greater way God could demonstrate His love for us, than to give His precious Son to such a cruel death.

CHAPTER 12

Theme 1: Becoming wise

General

In this chapter, Bunyan points to three vices or weaknesses that cripple people so that do not realise their Christian profession (simplicity, laziness and being presumptuous). The first is simplicity. The Bible describes the “simple” as “fools” (Prov. 1:20-22). God therefore gives His word to make the simple wise (Ps. 19:7). A wise person can be defined as someone who is able to practically apply biblical truth in his or her life so as to live in a way that pleases God. Head knowledge of God’s word is vital, but not enough. We must obey and apply that head knowledge so that our lives reflect godliness – that is becoming wise.

Application for our children

In order to become wise, they need firstly know what God’s word says. Secondly, they need to apply this wisdom to their daily lives. We spent many hours going through the many proverbs in Scripture, as well as the many verses that teach on practical Christian living. We discussed how to use our finances to please God (Prov. 11:4, 25; 2 Cor. 9:6-8), how to choose friends (Prov. 12:26), what to look for in a husband or wife (2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:22-28), what occupations would allow for Moms to stay home to raise their children (Titus 2:5), how to be a good employee (Eph. 6:5-8) and how to be a good employer (Eph. 6:9).

Theme 2: Becoming hard-working

General

The Bible clearly warns against laziness in all areas of our lives (Prov. 6:6-11; 2 Thess. 3:7-11).

Application for our children

We encouraged our children to work hard at whatever they do. This includes their chores at home, keeping their room tidy and especially their school work. Also in ministry, God wants us to be active and hard-working (2 Tim. 2:6).

Theme 3: Becoming diligent

General

Presumption represents people who are spiritually proud and self-confident (Deut. 17:12; Ps. 19:13). They generally presume on God's grace and believe that their spiritual state is fine. They would also therefore tend to neglect the advice of others and the voice of authority from church leaders (see Heb. 13:17).

Application for our children

The Bible calls us to examine ourselves, and to be diligent in the Christian walk (2 Cor. 13:5; Heb. 6:11; Rom. 12:11). We are not to presume upon God's grace, but to live carefully in the fear of the Lord (2 Cor. 7:1, 11). Our children must be taught the importance

of fellowship with other believers and being open to be corrected, so that this process can be facilitated.

CHAPTER 13

Theme 1: Warning against dead, formal religion

General

Formalist represents people with a dead, formal religion. They may do and say the right things, but are ultimately not converted. In Scripture, the Pharisees are typical examples of formalists (and hypocrites, as the two sins are very closely related). They are mostly interested in presenting an outward show of religion, so that they can be seen by men (Matt. 6:5; Matt. 23:27).

Because there is no inner reality to their religion, they often miss the more important aspects of God's will (Matt. 23:23), and will invariably not show any of the gracious fruit of the Holy Spirit, such as gentleness, kindness, love and mercy (See Gal. 5:22).

Application for our children

It is important to note that Formalist (and Hypocrisy) bypasses the narrow gate and the cross. This is crucial, as the narrow gate and cross are the remedy for a Formalist. The cross requires people to acknowledge their sin in true repentance, confession and contrition, and renounces "self-righteousness."

We need to therefore on a regular basis go back to the cross with our children. They need to be reminded that they are sinners, and cannot please God by "doing good things" and trying to be "religious." They need to be converted, have their hearts renewed, and be filled with the Spirit. Their conversion experience, whenever it takes place and whatever forms it takes, MUST include contrition,

sorrow for sin and a sincere turning to Christ. The Christian life must then be lived in the wonderful power and liberty of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:21; 2 Cor. 3:17).

Theme 2: Warning against hypocrisy

General

As his name implies, Hypocrisy represents the terrible sin of hypocrisy. The Pharisees were the classic example of hypocrites, and stirred the righteous anger of Christ (see Matt. 23:1ff). Hypocrisy is the sin of presenting an outward appearance of righteousness or religion without having an inner reality (very similar to formalist) (see Matt. 23:25-28). In many ways, the same comments above for Formalist can be repeated for the sin of hypocrisy.

Application for our children

As above, the remedy for the sin of hypocrisy is the cross. Our children need to be reminded that conversion is a radical, new-birth (John 3:1-8). Our hearts are naturally sinful and at enmity to God (Rom. 8:7-8). God needs to give us new hearts so that we can sincerely love and obey Him (Ezek. 36:26-28). We come to the cross sincerely confessing our sin (both outward acts and inner attitudes) and unworthiness, pleading for mercy and forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Peter is a good example of someone seeing and confessing his inner corruption and guilt (Luke 5:8). The tax collector is another such example (Luke 18:13).

God sees our hearts, and we cannot hide anything from Him. Hypocrisy is therefore the height of stupidity, thinking that God

cannot see our inner corruption. He is never fooled by mere outward appearances (1 Sam. 16:7).

CHAPTER 14 AND 15

Theme 1: The devoted soldier and the hard-working farmer

General

The Hill of Difficulty represents any difficult task, duty or trial that God has called us to. These difficulties test the believer's determination and commitment to Christ. Believers are therefore given the images of a soldier, athlete and a farmer to show them the commitment, dedication and hard-work that the Christian life requires (2 Tim. 2:3-6).

The Arbour represents times of respite and rest that God gives to us. However, these must not be abused. Little Christian soon falls asleep, which represents a period of self-indulgence beyond mere rest and recuperation for continued work and ministry for God.

Application for our children

We encouraged our children to be serious and diligent Christians, always busy with service and ministry. The current trend of Western churches with many "pew-warmers" who are not actively involved in ministry and church life is very disturbing. We warned our girls against becoming like that. There is a certain vigour, determination and joyful service that is very attractive and positive in a believer's life.

An associated topic was also the importance of belonging to and ministering in a local church. God's will for His children is to be active in a local church (Eph. 4:11-13). The church offices mentioned in this Ephesian's passage all functioned within the local

church environment. While some para-church groups have been used by God, the local church is His divinely sanctioned instrument (with accountability, fellowship and church officers) to accomplish His purposes.

We also encouraged our children to seek a spouse that was an involved, active Christian. They should not be satisfied with someone who merely attends church.

Theme 2: Trusting in God

General

Timorous and Mistrust (as the names indicate) are certain sins and weaknesses (see 2 Tim. 1:7 and Heb. 10:39) that manifest themselves during times of difficulty. The opposite virtues that the Bible encourages are a strong faith and boldness.

Application for our children

We can all sympathise with our children when they are distraught and tearful as they go through difficulties in relationships, at school and in the general difficulties of life. During these times we need to encourage them to actively trust in God. Faith in God during times of difficulty is the rich, fertile soil of Christian growth. In times of trial, God is testing the genuineness of our faith (James 1:2-4).

We therefore encouraged our children to a strong, active faith in God. We reminded them of God's promises and faithfulness. We also told them to expect times of difficulty, and to prepare for them now through maintaining prayer and Bible reading.

CHAPTER 16 AND 17

Theme 1: Christian fellowship

General

The Palace Beautiful represents the local, Christian church. Bunyan was a non-conformist (Baptist), and was making a point. The Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant State churches had generally become either corrupt or crippled through a high proportion of unregenerate church members. The non-conformists were often persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant state churches when they came into power (represented by the two lions). Due to this persecution, generally speaking, the non-conformist churches were filled with genuine believers who displayed the fruit of true repentance and conversion.

Application for our children

We encouraged our children to always look for a local church that held to regenerate church membership. This means a church that is serious about the Bible and biblical standards. Only those people with a clear testimony and some evidence of salvation should be allowed to join. This keeps the church as pure as humanly possible, and then it is indeed a beautiful palace. While not perfect, such a local church nevertheless provides a place of fellowship, encouragement and exposure to the truth that builds up a Christian in his or her most holy faith.

Theme 2: Christian virtues

General

The names of Discretion and her daughters indicate the character that a local church should have. In other words, these are the Christian graces and virtues that should characterise every believer. The local church then becomes a positive place of nurture and growth.

Application for our children

In this chapter we challenged our girls to think how they could positively contribute to a local church, and more broadly, to those around them. Rather than just think about what the local church could be for them, we asked them to think about what kind of influence they were in other people's lives, and especially in the church. Are they being salt and light to their friends and those around them? They need to be filled with the Holy Spirit each day, so that these beautiful virtues could be seen in their lives.

CHAPTER 18

Theme 1: Christian warfare and armour

General

The Bible depicts Christianity as a fight and warfare (1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7). The weapons of our warfare are not physical weapons, however, but spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4-5). In this warfare, it is essential to have Christian armour (Eph. 6:10-20). This armour is very important, as without it the Christian is vulnerable. The devil is our main enemy, together with sin and error (see 1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Cor. 10:5-6)

Application for our children

In this chapter, we focussed in two important issues. Firstly, we warned our girls that a Christian should have a “war-time” mentality. We are in a battle, not on holiday! We must therefore be on our guard against temptations, sin and error. It was when David was relaxing and taking a break from his responsibilities and duties that he fell into sin (2 Sam. 11:1).

Secondly, we asked our girls to memorise the armour of God in Ephesians 6, and explained the importance of each item. We simplified the armour to be age appropriate:

- (i) Belt of truth: it is important to know and believe the truth found in the Bible (the fight against error and deception), and also to be truthful people (the fight against lying which often comes so naturally to us).
- (ii) Breastplate of righteousness: it is critical to be covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ (the fight against self-righteousness), and also to be

- practically righteous in our personal lives (the fight against our natural tendency to sin).
- (iii) Shoes of the gospel of peace: to make sure we have believed the gospel (the fight against unbelief), and also being ready to tell others about Christ (fight against being ashamed of the gospel).
 - (iv) Shield of faith: actively trusting in God's promises every day (the fight against unbelief)
 - (v) Helmet of salvation: making sure that we are saved (the fight against presumption – the Bible does tell to examine ourselves – see 2 Cor. 13:5). We cannot be part of God's solution if we are in fact still part of the problem!
 - (vi) Sword of the Spirit which is the word of God: we must know, understand and keep God's word in our hearts and minds. This is only weapon we are given. We reminded our girls that even the Mighty Saviour used this sword against the devil (Matt. 4:1-10).
 - (vii) Prayer: the Lord Jesus linked prayer and watchfulness (Eph. 6:18; Mark 13:33; 1 Pet. 4:17). Many children of God can testify how it is in times of prayer (drawing near to God) that our sins come to mind, we are convicted of them, and we gain strength to turn away from them. Prayer also moves the Hand that moves the world. Fervent prayers are powerful and effective (James 5:16).

Get your children to memorise these seven parts of the Christians armour. All of them are necessary to fight the good fight!

CHAPTER 19 AND 20

Theme 1: The great battle against self

General

Bunyan was extremely perceptive in these two chapters. Little Christian fights his first real battle, receives a severe beating, and only just survives. If you think this battle is an exaggeration, then perhaps you have never fought with self.

The Lord Jesus was clear that the cost of discipleship includes denying self (Mark 8:34-38), one of the most difficult things to do. When we become Christians, we bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ. We determine to follow Him, and live in obedience to His will. While we may not do this perfectly, and may stumble often, the desire of the Christian is to follow Christ.

It is a profound error to teach or believe that a person can become a Christian without submitting to Christ. The notion that we can first receive Christ as Saviour, and then as a subsequent, later (and optional!) act become a disciple and accept Christ as Lord is completely false. Firstly, in Mark 8:34-38, the alternative to self-denial is losing one's soul in hell. In other words, in Mark 8 the Lord is not making a call to a higher, more devoted life. He is making a call to salvation. Self-denial and cross bearing is part and parcel of what it means to become a Christian. Secondly, in the Bible, the word "Christian" was applied to *disciples* – a disciple is not a special class of Christian (Acts 11:26). Thirdly, Romans 6 teaches that everyone who has been united to Christ walks in newness of life (Rom. 6:1-4). This change in the person results in him or her becoming a slave of righteousness (Rom. 6:17-18). This means that

every Christian bears real (although not perfect) fruit of holiness in their lives (Rom. 6:22).

Application for our children

Firstly, we warned our children about the serious error of believing that we can become Christians but continue living the way we want to. We cannot “tag” Christ to our lives as an extra appendage. If there is no real change and obedience (however imperfect it may be) in a person’s life, then he or she is not a Christian. The call to become a Christian is a call to bow the knee to Christ and receive Him as Lord and Saviour.

Secondly, we warned our girls that self-denial is extremely necessary, but extremely difficult. We must be prepared to lose our lives. This means being prepared to follow Christ wherever He may lead, and however uncomfortable it may be. It may mean giving up some of our dreams, and following Him.

It is equally important, however, to emphasise the rich reward found in Mark 8. When we do submit and surrender to God, we will truly find our fulfilment. Far from now leading a miserable life as a Christian, we find joy, peace and fulfilment. But the way to reach this fulfilment is through dying to self.

CHAPTER 21, 22 AND 23

Theme 1: Severe spiritual testing and affliction

General

It is important to note that this time of dark testing for Little Christian comes after a spiritual victory. Elijah experienced something similar. Immediately after the victory against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the threat of a single woman turns him to flight, and then follows a severe time of spiritual depression (1 Kings 18-19).

The Dark Valley represents a time of severe spiritual testing and affliction, most likely taken from Psalm 23:4. The scenes that Bunyan depicts in the Valley indicate that he was thinking of a spiritual condition of loneliness, dryness, doubting, confusion and fear. This is a time when the Christian feels little or nothing of the Holy Spirit's comfort and influences, when the Bible seems dry and lifeless, and when God seems to be far away. Many of the Psalms describe a similar condition (see for example Ps. 42).

Application for our children

It is important for our children to know that the spiritual life is not one of constant victory and feelings of continuous, ecstatic joy. There are times when, as believers, we have doubts, dryness and confusion.

In times like these they need to cling to Christ, and persevere in prayer and Bible reading. Just as the light slowly returned and the

mist faded gradually away from Little Christian, so this time of spiritual darkness and testing will pass.

Theme 2: Blessing of spiritual companionship

General

Little Christian finally catches up to Faithful, and they are both pleased to have companionship on their journey. The Bible is full of “one another” passages. See for example Rom. 12:16, Rom. 15:14, 1 Cor.12:25, Gal. 5:13. This indicates that God has never meant for Christians to live their lives in isolation from other believers. On the contrary, God has provided other believers to encourage us, help us and strengthen us on our spiritual journey.

Application for our children

We spoke to our children about what type of friends they should be seeking out, and what type of friends they should be to others. We cautioned them about the friends that they choose. The Proverbs especially have warnings about the companions we choose. We told our girls that our best, closest friends should be believers. This is not being snobbish; it is rather acknowledging that at the end of the day there is a limit on the encouragement and intimacy we can have those who are not believers (see 2 Cor. 6:14). They need friends who will encourage them to godliness and righteousness, not friends who will tempt them to sin.

At the same time, we asked our girls if they are a godly, positive and encouraging influence on their friends. They should always aim to be salt and light wherever they go, and especially be that amongst their friends.

Theme 3: The lure of pleasure

General

One of Faithful's strong temptations came from Pleasure. The Bible is clear that the love of pleasure is a powerful force that sways people from God and godliness (2 Tim. 3:4). It is not that God is against pleasure. On the contrary, God has designed us to enjoy pleasure – such as tasty food, sex, recreation, beauty. But all these pleasures need to be enjoyed within God's revealed will. Sex must never be outside of marriage (1 Cor. 7:9), and the enjoyment of food must never lead to gluttony (Prov. 23:21).

The history of the church is filled with examples of saints who could withstand trials and persecutions, but could not withstand the seduction of pleasure. Satan's greatest weapon against the church is the love of pleasure. The affluent, Western church in this age is, generally speaking, much weaker than the persecuted church.

Application for our children

We warned our children about the love of pleasure. We took time to explain that God is not "anti-pleasure." He gives us all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). But we stressed that this was within the bounds of God's revealed will and law. So we spoke openly about the beauty of sex within marriage, the enjoyment of food within moderation, and the enjoyment of recreation (the beach, fun, and holidays) within the bounds of being responsible and hard working.

Most importantly, we also spoke to our children about the very real and legitimate pleasure of serving God, and the pleasure of being with God (Ps. 16:11). Giving to others in need can bring us great joy and pleasure. Serving others can bring us great joy and a sense of

fulfilment. Christian service should never be dry and merely dutiful. There should be joy and pleasure in it.

CHAPTER 24

Theme 1: All talk and no action

General

At the end of the day, fruit is the acid test of true conversion (Matt. 7:15-20). A knowledge of doctrine alone is not sufficient evidence of saving faith (James 2:19). Displaying miraculous gifts is not sufficient evidence of saving faith (Matt. 7:21-23; 1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Rather, a life of obedience (not perfect, but genuine) motivated by love for God is true evidence that someone has been converted (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3; 1 John 2:3; John 14:15). Genuine faith will result in good works (James 2:14-26). BUT here it is absolutely critical to have a very clear understanding of the gospel and salvation. We are not saved by our good works, but by trusting and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved by grace ALONE through faith ALONE (Rom. 3:20-23; Gal. 3:5-9). However, saving faith is never alone. Good works always FOLLOW faith, as evidence that it is genuine.

Bunyan therefore introduces Talkative, to show that a mere display of Christian talk and doctrine, if it is not accompanied by a life of real (although imperfect) obedience to God, does not mean that someone is saved.

Application for our children

We took considerable time to teach our children about salvation, faith, and how works are the result of salvation, not the basis of our salvation. As sinners, we have a natural tendency towards a works-based religion. We want to improve ourselves and make ourselves righteous. Our children will have this natural tendency too, so we

spoke to them about our sinful condition that makes it impossible for us to save ourselves by our works. We need a Saviour – the Lord Jesus Christ. But once we have been saved by God, we have a new heart, a living faith and the Holy Spirit from which a life of good works follow.

We also asked an important practical question – how could we identify someone like Talkative. Bunyan mentions something important. When Talkative was questioned about his obedience, he became aggressive and defensive. A true Christian, on the other hand, when questioned, will humbly confess to having a desire to obey Christ, but sadly not always living the life he wants to (see the experience of a Christian life in conflict in Rom. 7:14-25). Such humble sincerity is a mark of a true Christian, and won't be found in a person like Talkative.

CHAPTER 25

Theme 1: Preparation for trials

General

The little pilgrims are about to go through a severe trial and persecution. It is noteworthy that Bunyan has a chapter with Evangelist meeting with the pilgrims and warning them of the trial to come. Many Christians can testify to the fact that God had prepared them for significant trials, either by issuing them with warnings, or by taking them through less difficult trials through which they learnt valuable lessons.

Application for our children

We raised two main points with our children in relation to this passage. Firstly, we encouraged them to read their Bibles faithfully, expectantly and prayerfully. God speaks through His word. His word contains many lessons, warnings and examples. Many saints can testify to the Holy Spirit's role in bringing certain warnings or passages from the Bible to life in their hearts as a preparation for a trial or temptation.

Secondly, we must never despise the trials or "lessons of life" that God puts us through (see Heb. 12:2-11). Often, God is preparing us and teaching us lessons through lesser trials that will help us endure or overcome larger trials or temptations. When our children go through difficulties, it is important to pray with them and speak to them about what lessons can be learnt (from both their victories and failures).

CHAPTER 26

Theme 1: Being “in” the world but not “of” the world

General

In the Bible, the term “world” generally denotes mankind that has gone astray from God. It refers to the present world order that is separated from God and under sin. The world:

- is ruled by Satan (John 12:31)
- cannot receive the Spirit of truth (John 14:17)
- hates Christ and believers (John 15:18)
- includes the lust of the flesh, eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2:16)
- must not be loved by believers, or else the love of the Father is not in them (1 John 2:15)

While Christians live in the world, they must not be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). In other words, they must not share the same values and principles of the world order. Rather, they must be transformed in their thinking and resultant lifestyle through God’s word.

Application for our children

We spoke to our children about the difficulty of being in the world, and enjoying some of the things of the world, yet not becoming worldly. This can be quite difficult to practically define, and to know where to draw the line. We gave this simple rule to help our children: we can use and enjoy the things of the world as long as they don’t lead us to sin, and don’t distract us from serving God. So

we can use our money to buy the “things” of the world, as long as the “things” we buy do not become paramount and prevent us from giving generously to God’s kingdom. We can participate in and enjoy some of the things of the world, as long as they don’t become paramount and prevent us from serving God. So practically speaking, we can enjoy the things of the world (sport, recreation etc) as long as they don’t take us away from our daily devotions (Bible reading and prayer), attending church on a Sunday, and from ministry.

We also reminded them not fall into the opposite trap of shunning everything in the world. The Bible indicates that God gives us all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). When we go to the beach as a family, for example, we point out to our children the beauty of the sea, and that God made it for us to enjoy. When we go to eat out, we point out that God had given us tasty food and taste buds so that we could enjoy it.

We indicated to our children that they will have to “draw the line” for themselves one day, and decide where the boundary is between being in the world but not of the world. It is also worth noting that as our children become teenagers and then mature into adults, we can allow them to start deciding these standards for themselves (within limits, of course).

CHAPTER 27-28

Theme 1: Persecution from the world

General

Bunyan himself had intimate knowledge of persecution. He was in jail for many years because he was a non-conformist preacher of the gospel. Both he and his family suffered deeply.

There are a number of issues that Bunyan refers to in this chapter. Firstly, the motivation for the attack against Christians is that they belong to God (John 15:19-20) – the Judge hated the King and His saints. Secondly, Satan is the one behind the persecution (Rev. 2:10) – the Judge was one of the chief servants of the Wicked Prince. Thirdly, those going through persecution need to remind themselves that Christ was persecuted before them (John 15:19-20), and that their sufferings are for His sake. Also, their sufferings will be rewarded in the next life (Heb. 10:34).

Application for our children

In this chapter we explained to our children the above mentioned reasons for persecution. We also discussed the need to remind ourselves of our reward and to look to Jesus when we are persecuted. We need to feed our faith with God's promises during difficult times. Another point we discussed was that in persecuting Christians, the world often tries to make itself look fair, objective and respectable – in this chapter Bunyan notes that the jury pretended to be fair. This can place additional psychological pressure on Christians, and cause doubts to arise in their minds during times of persecution. Yet, they must remember that the

world did the same to Christ at the time of His crucifixion - a mock trial with false witnesses.

We also discussed the fact that there is still currently much active persecution of Christians, especially in communist and Muslim countries. When we pray as a family, we often mention the persecuted church, and encourage our children never to forget our brothers and sisters in distress.

CHAPTER 29

Theme 1: Relief during trials

General

God is our perfect, heavenly Father (Matt. 5:48). He knows exactly what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). He is in complete control of the believer's persecution (Acts 4:27-28), and will grant relief at just the right time.

Application for our children

As believers we need to trust God during trials. Believers are often afraid that they will not be able to endure persecution and pain. Our children can have similar fears. At one point one of our girls confessed that she thought she should become a Christian later in life, as she was afraid she would stop being a Christian if she was too young and could not endure opposition and temptations. We encouraged her to look to the Lord and the strength that He provides. He is a true Father, and will watch over us, and not let His children be overcome by the trials He sends.

Theme 2: Incidents of kindness from the world

General

Bunyan describes the incident where the wife of the prison keeper helps and cares for Little Christian. Although in previous chapters Bunyan has shown the world in its true colours, this does not mean that some of the people in the world, while not being believers, cannot show some degree of kindness to believers. Many Christians

can testify to receiving unexpected help and kindnesses from unbelievers.

It is crucial to see the hand of God behind these acts of kindness. In these instances, God is providing care for His children through moving the hearts of unbelievers. In Scripture, we are told on numerous occasions how God gave His people favour in the eyes of men who were not believers (see as examples Gen. 39:21; Exod. 12:36; Neh. 2:5; Esther 2:15; Dan. 1:9). Indeed, the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, and He moves it however He wishes (Prov. 21:1).

Application for our children

We may, as believers, receive these kindnesses from people who are not necessarily Christians. We must thank them for their help and kindness. But ultimately, we must give praise to God, and thank Him for moving people to be kind to us. He is the One who is providing for His children.

CHAPTER 30

Theme 1: Sincerity and simplicity in the Christian life

General

In 2 Corinthians 1:12 the virtues of simplicity and godly sincerity are recommended to us. In this context, simplicity does not mean being simple (as in Prov. 1:22), but refers to being single hearted as opposed to being duplicitous or double-minded (see James 1:8; 4:8). The boy By-ends represents those who have an outward appearance of religion, but are actually motivated in their lives by personal comfort, wanting to have style and prestige, and be popular or well-spoken of. By-ends therefore refuses to travel when any degree of sacrifice or discomfort is involved. The Lord Jesus spoke of people like this, who turn away from following Him when suffering is involved or when they have to give up riches (Mark 4:17-19).

Application for our children

We must remind our children that the call to be a Christian is the same call to be a disciple. We are to continue following Christ even in poverty, sickness and being despised by the world. Like Moses, we must rather choose to suffer affliction with God's people than enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:24-26). Our children must also learn to examine their motives. Why do they want to be Christians? Is it because it is currently popular or trendy to be a Christian in the Youth Group, and all their friends are being baptised? Would they still want to be baptised if none of their friends were Christians, and would laugh at them for becoming Christians?

CHAPTER 31

Theme 1: The money trap

General

This is a critical chapter for contemporary Christianity, where prosperity theology is rampant. Popular authors are telling Christians that God wants them to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous. If they are not, then there is something wrong with their faith. This is a serious error, and extremely destructive to biblical Christianity.

The Bible is replete with warnings about the love and money and the desire to be rich (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Although the Bible teaches that money in itself is not sin; after all Abraham, Job and other saints were wealthy. Yet there can be no doubt that the general thrust of the NT is negative towards earthly riches (see Matt. 6:24; Matt. 13:22; Luke 18:24; 1 Tim. 6:17; James 5:1-3). It is completely erroneous to teach that poverty is a result of a lack of faith. The Bible teaches the opposite – God has chosen the poor and despised to be rich in faith (James 2:5-6). Not many wise, mighty and noble are called to become Christians (1 Cor. 1:26).

Bunyan therefore introduces Demas, who is found in Scripture (2 Tim. 4:10). He tries to allure the Pilgrims out of the narrow with the promise of wealth.

Application for our children

We had a very important discussion with our girls about money, and how to avoid its trappings. There were also a number of practical issues to talk about.

Firstly, it is not wrong to have and earn money. Believers are specifically told to work hard, and earn money, so that they can support themselves and others (1 Tim. 5:8; 2 Thess. 3:6-12).

Secondly, when do we pursue money incorrectly? The main principle is that when we start pursuing money to the detriment of our other responsibilities and duties, we cross the line. For example, if our pursuit of money causes us to neglect Bible reading and prayer, we have crossed the line. If our pursuit of money leads us away from serving and ministering in a local church, we have crossed the line. If our pursuit of money causes us to neglect the nurture and upbringing of our children, we have crossed the line. In our devotions we used the example of getting a job offer (with an increased salary) in a town where there is no biblical church to attend. This is most likely a temptation from Satan, not an opening from God.

Thirdly, how can we practically make sure that money has not started to become too important to us? Here the biblical principle of giving generously helps us. We cannot be covetous, money-loving people and generous at the same time. We are therefore encouraged to be generous in providing for the poor and supporting ministry (2 Cor. 9:1). Indeed, the reason God blesses us with money is so that we can be generous towards others and support ministry (2 Cor. 9:8).

Lastly, we read some of the promises and examples in Scripture to encourage our faith in the area of giving and generosity. For example, we read Proverbs 19:7, 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-7.

CHAPTER 32

Theme 1: Peace and comfort

General

Bunyan places this account of the Valley of Peace right after the persecution and suffering of Vanity Fair. There is no doubt that Bunyan himself experienced God's peace and comfort after severe trials. Paul himself recounts times of comfort and refreshing after severe trials (2 Cor. 1:3-4, 8-9).

Application for our children

We spoke about God's goodness and kindness to us. He knows exactly what we are going through, what we are feeling, and how much we are able to bear. As a perfect Father, He sends us through trials so that we can grow (James 1:2ff). Yet he never lets us be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). He also then provides comfort, relief and rest for his children (2 Cor. 1:3-4). We can therefore trust in the wisdom and provision of our Father. He watches over us as a Shepherd (Ps. 23). Nothing we endure escapes His notice and purpose for our lives.

CHAPTER 33

Theme 1: Little compromises

General

Bunyan was alert to the often serious consequences arising from small compromises. By-pass Meadow looks very inviting, seems to follow very closely to the narrow way, and would even seem to have a recovery plan if things went wrong (the Pilgrims would just hop back over the fence). Yet things went very wrong for them.

God often gives His children, through His word, *clear* and *precise* instructions. These instructions are to be followed diligently and carefully. Examples abound of people who followed their own “instincts” and “wisdom” which it lead to their destruction (see the example of Saul in 1 Sam. 13:7-14 and Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 10:1-3).

As parents raising children, there are serious lessons to be learnt. We must raise our children so that they learn to obey our instructions the first time, carefully and precisely. When they deviate through carelessness or wilful disobedience, they need to be disciplined (Prov. 13:24). This discipline is essential for their spiritual welfare, because if they grow up thinking they can disregard and be careless with their parents’ instructions, they will do the same with the word of God. It is no surprise at all when children, after being allowed to disobey their parents’ instructions with no consequence, do the same with the word of God. After all, their parents have trained them that there is no consequence to disobeying rules!

Application for our children

We spoke to our children about how the little pilgrims suffered unforeseen consequences through small compromises. We then spoke about the necessity to obey God's word precisely and carefully. We warned them about trusting in their own "wisdom" and "instincts" in trying to figure out the best decisions for the situations that life will throw at them. Some of these compromises can include:

- Dating (or even worse, marrying) an unbeliever in the hope that they will be an instrument for their conversion through the relationship
- Telling "white" lies
- Small dishonesties such as cheating in school exams (or on their tax forms, for future reference!)
- Parents not disciplining children out of fear of harming them (also for future reference for our children when they become parents)

We also then spoke to them about why we expected obedience from them to our instructions, and why we disciplined them when they disobeyed. It was to train them to obey God. We also spoke about how they should one day raise their children, and the importance and function that discipline plays in the lives of children.

CHAPTER 34-35

Theme 1: Caught in despair

General

As we read the Scriptures and the Psalms in particular, we see that God's people go through various emotional battles, ranging from despair to depression (see for example Ps. 42). These can be severe, and have a variety of causes, from physical to spiritual.

Application for our children

We discussed various afflictions that our children could experience in their lives in this world. As they got older and were in their teen years, we were also able to discuss emotional battles that might not be relevant for younger children. These include depression, spiritual dryness, anxiety and despair. The simple lesson was that Christians go through these battles, and they need to be prepared for them. They need not think that there is something peculiar about them if they experience some of these things at some stage in their lives.

Theme 2: Faith in the promises of God- the key to the Christian life

General

Faith is one of the golden keys for a Christian. The Little Pilgrims escape by using the key of promise. Faith is the instrument through which we obtain salvation and eternal life (Rom. 3:22). Faith is also the key to the ongoing Christian life. It is through faith that the

“heroes of the faith” overcame the world (see Heb. 11, and note the emphasis of faith). The Bible is adamant that without faith we cannot please God (Heb. 11:6).

It is therefore critical to understand what faith is, and what it is not. Faith is not:

- Desperately trying to convince God to do something we want Him to do
- A spiritual “force” to either twist God’s arm or to bring to reality those things we want
- Really “believing hard” that something we want will happen

Rather, faith is simply trusting in the promises of God. Note the emphases on the word “promise” in Heb. 11 (verse 9, 11, 13). As Hebrews 11:13 indicates, faith is knowing the promises of God, being assured of them, and embracing them.

Many people (including Christians) today have an incorrect view of faith. For example, they may say that they have faith that they will pass an exam, or that they will be able to save all the money they need to go on a trip. This cannot be biblical faith, as God has not promised that we will pass all our exams, or that we will have enough money to go on a trip. When these expectations of people are not met, they either think their faith is not strong enough (and so try to believe “harder”), or that there is something wrong with Christianity and God. This is a very damaging to one’s spiritual life.

In contrast, Biblical faith is resting and trusting in what God has specifically promised in the Bible. When we do this, we will never be disappointed, and God is faithful and cannot lie.

Application for our children

Firstly, we taught our children very clearly what Biblical faith is. We also used some real-life examples to explain the difference between true and false faith. True faith is not:

- Really believing I will find my blazer that I left at school
- Really believing that my boyfriend won't break up with me
- Really believing that I will grow taller, or become prettier

While we may pray for a whole variety of issues (that we may find our blazer, for example), we leave these issues in the hands of our Father. We do not have promises that God will always let us find things we have lost, or that people we love will always love us in return.

However, when it comes to God's specific promises (such as John 3:16 and Heb. 13:5), we must tenaciously embrace them, confess them and trust our soul's destiny to a faithful God who will always deliver on His promises.

Secondly, we therefore encouraged our girls to treasure God's promises in their hearts, and to remind themselves what God has promised when the world or Satan seeks to cause them to doubt. Throughout our girls' lives, we have memorised many biblical promises, so that hopefully they will be retained, remembered and relied upon.

CHAPTER 36

Theme 1: Helping one another

General

Bunyan describes the little pilgrims placing the warning at the stile. This signifies both the duty and the joy that believers have to help each other in their spiritual walk (see Gal. 6:1-3; Rom. 14:13, 19; 1 Cor. 12:25).

Application for our children

There were two lessons that we spoke to our children about. Firstly, we discussed the fact that God selects our life's experiences and trials for a reason. They are not random. We learn lessons in life from our own mistakes, or from living in a fallen world. God expects us to take these lessons to heart, learn from them, and share, encourage and warn other believers.

Secondly, we have a reciprocal duty to listen to others who have gone through trials, so that we can learn from their experiences and wisdom. We used the example of some of our Christian friends who married unbelievers. They have learned to regret this mistake over many years. Their husbands were not interested in attending worship, not able to teach their children from the Bible, nor give a godly lead in the home. One such friend shared that it was her mission to warn younger Christian ladies not to date or marry unbelievers. She spoke from bitter experience, and certainly warned others who were being tempted to follow a similar path.

Theme 2: Times of refreshing

General

Bunyan describes the Delectable Mountains as a place where a Christian finds:

- Nourishment (food and water)
- Fellowship
- Shepherds to watch over them

He is clearly describing the local church, where God provides spiritual nourishment (teaching from the word – see 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:2), elders to shepherd the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-4, Eph. 4:11-13), and fellowship (Acts 2:42).

Application for our children

We encouraged our girls again to make sure that when they were older and out of our home, they would be joined to a local church. It must be a church that teaches and practices truth, and where believers are truly born again. In addition, they should be active in the church, and also participate in cell groups or Bible study. In this way, they would make sure that they enjoy the provision of God through the local church.

CHAPTER 37

Theme 1: The importance of truth

General

The Rock of Error represents people who have suffered shipwreck through believing error. It is popular in the world today to deny that there is absolute truth. “Truth” is rather thought to be relative, and each person can choose their own “truth,” and the “truth” that they choose is no better or worse than someone else’s “truth.”

This is completely wrong. Apart from the logical fallacy involved in this modern view (that people are *absolutely* sure there is *no absolute* truth), the Bible contradicts the current world view. The Bible teaches that there is absolute truth, and this truth resides in the word of God (John 17:17). The words of Christ are truth (John 14:6), and those who believe and live by this word of truth experience liberty from sin and are saved from destruction (John 8:31-32). Furthermore, knowledge of the truth is essential to salvation (1 Tim. 2:4).

The Bible therefore warns against false teachers that will arise from within the church (2 Pet. 2), and about people who want to listen to false teachers (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

Application for our children

Two issues are vital for our children to grasp. The first is that they must have a love for the truth (John 3:19; 2 Thess. 2:10). It is absolutely essential to know and believe the truth. It is not optional.

Secondly, they must therefore study the Bible to know the truth. In the same way that they exert themselves to study for exams, so they should put effort into studying the Bible for themselves. Everything they hear or read should be tested with the Scriptures. They must therefore know what the Bible teaches.

[Even as we spoke to our children about this important subject, we determined that after we had finished reading Little Pilgrims Progress, we would start a programme of learning basic Christian doctrine with our children. Our aim to is to take each major biblical theme (the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrines of salvation etc), and deal with them briefly but thoroughly so that our children are grounded in the truth. In doing this as a family, they will also learn from us how to study the Bible.]

Theme 2: The importance of diligence and caution

General

It seems that Bunyan, in describing Mount Caution, was thinking of people who were driven to destructive despair and some even to suicide. It is not easy to understand the complexities of this condition, and exactly what Bunyan had in mind. However, there are some lessons to be learnt from the main point of Mount Caution. Firstly, when we leave the paths of truth into error and sin, we have no idea where they will lead, and what the end of it will be. The Bible is clear that there are some who people appear to be believers, but then ruin their souls in destruction (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Secondly, the Bible exhorts us to cling to Christ and the truth, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12) and to maintain a clear conscience (1 Tim. 4:1-3). We should heed the warnings of Scripture, and not be careless (1 Cor. 10:12; 1 Tim. 4:16).

Application for our children

We spoke to our children about the modern idea that Christianity should just be “light” and “non-serious.” This is a mistake. Rather, Christians should be serious (although joyful), because they understand the seriousness of hell and the joys of heaven. These are not “light” and frivolous issues. As noted earlier, the Bible speaks about working out our salvation with “fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

CHAPTER 38

Theme 1: Ignorance is not bliss

General

Bunyan describes a certain type of person with the character of Ignorance. He is a church goer. He believes he is on his way to heaven, and that he will be let in when he gets there. However, he feels the narrow way and the cross are unnecessary, as he is good enough in himself to get to heaven. When he is challenged with the truth from the Little Pilgrims, he chooses to rather follow his own way.

There is biblical warrant for Bunyan to describe such people. Matthew 7:21-23 describes people who are in the church, ministering and serving, and fully expecting to get into heaven. Yet they are rejected by God. Romans 10:2-4 describes people (Jews in this instance) who are zealous for God, but not according to knowledge. They are ignorant of God's righteousness, and seek to establish their own. In other words, they reject the cross of Christ, and the righteousness that Christ bought for His people on the cross.

The Bible is therefore clear that at the very least a basic knowledge of sin, who God is, what Christ has done on the cross and that He is the Saviour is necessary to be saved (see the argument from Romans 10:13-15 – people cannot believe unless they hear the gospel).

It is becoming more and more popular to either believe that people can be saved by just living according to their conscience, or believing in the little bit of religious light that they have. This is

completely false. Everyone is a sinner and destined for hell. Unless they hear the gospel and believe on Christ, they cannot be saved. Ignorance is not bliss, but a serious hindrance to salvation. This makes preaching the gospel, world missions and personal evangelism a compelling task.

Application for our children

We spoke about two main issues with our girls. Firstly, we warned them about the current state of Christianity within Western culture. Like Ignorance, many attend church, believe they are on their way to heaven, and yet do not believe that the cross is necessary to get to heaven. They feel their own obedience is good enough for God, and feel offended if it is suggested that their own righteousness cannot meet God's perfect standards. They don't believe that they need the Lord Jesus to wash their sins away. We implored our girls to avoid this mentality like the plague. We need to know our sinfulness, and rely every day on the righteousness of Christ to make us acceptable to God (Eph. 1:6). Only He can make us faultless in God's sight (Jude 24).

Secondly, we must be supporting world missions and evangelism with our finances, with our prayers, and with our time. It is the world's most dire need in every age.

CHAPTER 39

Theme 1: The careless prisoner

General

Bunyan describes a pilgrim who once got close to the heavenly city, but then became careless, forgot about his pilgrimage and lost his roll. When he tried to continue his pilgrimage at a later time, he had no effective armour or sword, and so was easily captured and taken back to the City of Destruction.

The Bible is clear that someone who is truly saved will continue to persevere in the faith (see chapter 3 and 4, theme 1), even though he or she may have times of backsliding. This prisoner was different. It is possible that Bunyan had Hebrews 6:4-8 in mind. This person seemed to have a religious experience and some of the Holy Spirit's influences. Yet it is clear that Hebrews 6:8 is describing someone who is ultimately an unbeliever, as there is no genuine fruit in his or her life, but rather thorns and briers.

The Bible therefore teaches two complimentary truths. The first is that true believers will be kept by God's power for salvation (1 Pet. 1:5). The second is that there is a need for true believers to be careful, keep striving, and to be watchful (Heb. 6:11; Matt. 25:13). There is no contradiction. God uses the warnings to believers as one of the means to keep them persevering in faith.

Application for our children

We encouraged our children to always be watchful and prayerful, for our enemy is seeking to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). We need to maintain bible reading, prayer and attending to the means of grace so that we will persevere in the faith.

Theme 2: Little Faith

General

The bible clearly teaches that some believers have greater faith than others (Rom. 14:1), and that believers can grow in their faith (Luke 17:5; 2 Cor. 10:15). Bunyan describes someone of little faith. Although Little Faith was saved in the end (because God will always protect and save all His true children), he had a narrow escape, and brought great harm upon himself.

Application for our children

We reminded our children that it is foolish to be content with little faith. To have a little faith means that we are, to a certain degree, mistrusting God's promises, and therefore being timid and fearful. This greatly dishonours God. God is worthy of our full trust. Any lack of trust in Him is sinful, and needs to be repented of. While we ought to be gentle and encouraging with our children, we must not excuse times when they display lack of faith and trust in God. We rather need to point it out as sin, and encourage them to grow in their faith.

The key is that faith comes by hearing God's word, and is a gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 10:17; Phil. 1:29). Our children ought therefore to grow in faith by reading the Bible, relying on the Holy Spirit, and actively exercising their faith in life's ups and downs.

CHAPTER 40

Theme 1: Flattery won't get you anywhere

General

The Bible teaches that flattery is sin (see Ps. 12:3; Prov. 26:28; Jude 1:16). Flattery can be defined as untruthful, excessive praise of someone in order to gain some advantage from them. For example, a seductress will use flattery (Prov. 6:24), and the enemy of God will corrupt people through flattery (Dan. 11:32).

Note how Bunyan shows how easily flattery overcomes the little pilgrims. They are led astray and entangled in his net with hardly any resistance. Flattery is powerful!

Application for our children

We asked our children why flattery was so powerful. They did not really have an answer. We therefore had a discussion about the natural pride that resides in all of us. The truth is that we like being praised. When people flatter us, they are in fact telling us what we secretly want to hear. Flattery therefore has a warm and almost immediate reception in our hearts.

So we then asked our children what was a great antidote to flattery. They again did not really know. So we spoke about true humility and brokenness before God. When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to our true state of sinfulness, and we become sorrowful and broken by our sin, we have a deep realisation that we are not marvellous, wonderful people. Only such a broken heart will in fact despise flattery, because it will know deep down that the praise that is being spoken is false.

So we encouraged our children to know themselves as sinners, and to assure themselves of this one thing – they are sinners in God’s sight, and worthy of God’s anger and judgement without the wonderful, saving grace of Christ. Only such a view of themselves will save them from the Flatterer. This obviously goes against the current wisdom of the world, which tells us we need to constantly remind ourselves of how wonderful we are, and continually bolster our self-esteem.

Theme 2: Relying on our own wisdom

General

As noted in chapter 1, theme 3, we need to rely on the Bible for guidance and direction in life. Instead of using the map (Bible), the little pilgrims rely on their own intuition and ability to assess the correct path. It is the Bible alone that is a light for our path (Ps. 119:105).

Application for our children

We emphasised this truth with our children by using some common examples or situations they may be faced with. We asked them if it was correct to consider carefully whether to date or marry an unbeliever by looking at whether they thought they were compatible as a couple, or if the person came from a good family. If they did this, they would fall into the trap that the little pilgrims fell into. The Bible is clear that Christians should only marry other Christians, and this should be adhered to. There is no need to “assess” this situation.

However, as our children got older, we did draw a distinction between situations that do require us to assess, deliberate and

seek counsel, and those that do not. For example, in making decisions about how to invest money, the Bible only gives general guidelines (it should be honest and responsible, for example). We may then, within these general guidelines, do research and ask for guidance from financial advisors as to what would be good options for investment. The point is that when the Bible gives clear guidance, we are simply to obey the instructions and there is no reason to deliberate the choice before us. When only general principles are given, we may use our intuition and abilities (together with prayer) to make a decision within the boundaries of these principles.

CHAPTER 41

Theme 1: God's discipline

General

In this chapter, the little pilgrims are rescued by an angel, and also punished by him.

The Bible holds two truths closely together. The first truth is that if we are united to Christ, we have peace with Him (Rom. 5:1), we are adopted as His children (Eph. 1:5), and we will never be subject to God's anger and judgement (John 5:24). The other truth is that, as children, we are still subject to God's discipline (Heb. 12:5-11). We can even come under God's displeasure (2 Sam. 11:27). There is no contradiction between these truths, as God disciplines His children whom He loves, so that they will be holy and bear righteous fruit in the future (Heb. 12:6).

Application

We discussed God's discipline with our children, and read Hebrews 11:5-11 together. We emphasised a few points:

- All God's children are disciplined (vs. 8)
- We must not despise this discipline (vs. 5) by getting angry with God or rebelling against it.
- God's discipline can be painful and grievous (vs. 11)
- God's discipline is done in love (vs. 6) for our correction (vs. 9). This means it is always for our good.
- God's discipline is effective – it makes us holy and fruitful (vs. 10-11)

God's discipline can sometimes be confusing. It often seems as if God is simply angry with us and punishing us harshly. We need to cling to these verses by faith when we encounter discipline. It is done by a loving Father, who is correcting us for our good.

We need to have an attitude of humble submission to God's dealings with us, always remembering that, as one hymn writer said, there is a smile behind God's frowning providence.

CHAPTER 42

Theme 1: Confronting unbelief

General

In this chapter, Unbelief takes the form of a pleasant, gentle person dressed in pilgrim's clothes, yet he completely denies the existence of the king and the heavenly city. Bunyan was no doubt thinking of clergymen in his day who denied doctrines that form the foundation of the Christian faith.

Application

We discussed the various forms of unbelief that our children could or would be confronted with in their lives. The most obvious form of unbelief in the world, are the atheists who insist there is no life after death and no God. They are sure of their position, and confident in their assertions. They can shake the faith of believers.

On the other side of the spectrum are priests, bishops, arch-bishops and popes who deny cardinal truths of the Bible. Many will insist that hell is not real, that the death of Christ on the cross did not atone for sin, that we are saved by our works, and that the Lord Jesus was not literally resurrected. One can scarcely believe that they are allowed to remain in the visible church. We warned our children about such religious people. They are wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). They are not Christians, and their unbelief regarding the clear teachings of the Bible is just as deadly as the atheist. All Christians therefore need to be on their guard. We must know our Bibles, be rooted in sound doctrine, and cling to the truth with all our hearts.

CHAPTER 43

Theme 1: The importance of Christian fellowship

General

Chapters 21 to 23 (Theme 2) have already mentioned the importance of Christian fellowship. This theme is mentioned again by Bunyan. Hopeful would almost certainly have succumbed to sleep had not Little Christian kept him awake.

God commands believers to stir each other up to love and good works (Heb. 10:24). We are to look out that none fall short of God's grace (Heb. 12:15). All these commands fall under the umbrella of encouraging one another to continue persevering in the faith and serving God (1 Thess. 5:8-11).

Christians have three sources of temptation and discouragements—the world, the flesh and the devil. These sources erode our spiritual vigour and zeal. It is therefore critical that believers encourage one another in the power of the Holy Spirit, as there is no other source of Christian encouragement in the world.

Application

We reminded our children again about the importance of Christian friends, fellowship in a local church, and marrying a Christian spouse. While it may be important to still be in the world (see theme 3 below) and to have non-Christian friends, the Bible warns against keeping company with people of poor character or ungodly virtues (see Prov. 22:24-25; 1 Cor. 15:33). Our closest friends and our spouse should be those who will encourage us in our faith,

rather than be those who, even though subtly and perhaps unconsciously, dampen our Christian fervour.

Theme 2: The importance of active ministry

General

In this chapter, Bunyan mentions a very important aspect of the Christian life. When little Christian shook Hopeful awake, he himself was also energised out of lethargy. This is an important spiritual principle. When we are active in ministry, we find that our faith and spiritual vitality are also strengthened. A church should therefore strive to have an “active church membership” policy. Pew warming should be discouraged, and every member of the church should be encouraged to participate in ministry.

Application

We encouraged our children to be active in ministry and evangelism. Even as young children or teenagers, they can be involved in some forms of ministry in the church, and also maintain an active witness amongst their friends.

Theme 3: the importance of being “in” but not “of” the world

General

The same theme is repeated from chapter 26, theme 1. Hopeful recounted how, in Vanity Fair, he was diverted from his pilgrimage through friendship with the world. It took the persecution of

Faithful and Little Christian to bring conviction and a resolution to continue on his pilgrimage.

Application

We reminded our children that being friends with the world is enmity towards God (James 4:4). We explained how this is to be applied, as we acknowledged above that we can have friends who are non-Christians. We explained that to be friends with “the world” in the biblical sense means to accept, be comfortable with and imbibe the world’s values and basic philosophy. A person cannot do this without betraying and sacrificing God’s values and perspectives. The decision to become a Christian therefore includes the choice to forsake the world and its values and embrace the truth that is found in the Lord Jesus Christ (see the general principle found in Matt. 6:24).

CHAPTER 44

Theme 1: The need for discernment

General

Bunyan has already introduced Ignorance (see chapter 38, theme 1). In this chapter, Bunyan explores the subtleties of Ignorance's condition. After engaging with Ignorance, Little Christian and Hopeful, while sure that there is something wrong with Ignorance, are nevertheless a little confused. This is mainly because Ignorance seems to give many correct responses, and comes across as sincere. For example, Ignorance says that he is thinking about the heavenly city and the King (he seems spiritually minded), he says he tries to obey the King (he professes to live in obedience to God), he seems to trust in the King to rescue him if he gets into trouble (he seems to have degree of faith and trust), and he has a desire to get to the heavenly city. So is he not a true Christian?

Two issues are decisive that can guide us through this complex condition. Firstly, Ignorance did not receive a message from the King. This represents hearing and receiving the gospel message from the word of God. As noted in a previous chapter, salvation only comes through hearing the true gospel, and humbly receiving and believing this message. This message is centred on the Person of Christ – His death and resurrection that paid the price for our sins and satisfied God's righteous requirements on our behalf. So Ignorance had not heard and embraced the gospel.

Secondly, when the Pilgrims advise Ignorance of the King's instruction to go through the narrow gate and go to the cross, he refuses. This shows that, at the end of day, Ignorance has not

humbly obeyed the gospel, but is rather following his own religion. Although professing to obey the King, he refuses to submit himself to the King's basic message of the gospel. This displays a stubborn heart that refuses to yield to the King's will.

Application

We asked our children if they were a little confused by this interaction with Ignorance. They responded that they were. This is an important lesson. As Chapter 38 has explained, Ignorance represents moral, religious people who can be found in church. They seem to be believers. They seem to want to obey God. They talk about God. They want to go to heaven. But ultimately they are not trusting in Christ and His death on the cross to pay for their sins. They are trusting in their own righteousness and goodness to be accepted into heaven. These people can be confusing to young Christians.

We gave our children two keys to help them discern such people. The first key relates to receiving the simple gospel message in the Bible. If people have not heard the gospel, or have not humbly received and trusted this message, they are not Christians. The second key is that if religious people, no matter how sincere they seem, do not trust in Christ alone for their salvation and do not profess Him as their only hope to gain access to heaven, they are not true Christians.

We therefore advised our children to be especially careful when it comes to marriage. They must not just accept someone to be a Christian because he or she is attending church, or using Christian vocabulary. They need to spend time with a prospective spouse to see that there is true conversion, and a humble submission to Christ and the gospel.

CHAPTER 45

Theme 1: Growth in grace

General

Bunyan wanted to teach something specific with this chapter on the Land of Delights. In his pastoral experience, he had come across believers who had walked with God for many years. Their faith had deepened and their trust in God had grown, so that toward the latter years of their lives they had periods where they could almost taste heaven. The heavenly realities that were hidden from their physical eyes were nevertheless clear to their spiritual eyes. They had seasons of great delight in God and the coming joys of heaven. In these periods great peace flooded their souls, and they were not molested by sins, fears and anxieties that so easily entangle Christians.

Application

It is important that we devote ourselves to Christian growth. Our children need to be encouraged to see their lives on earth as a pathway to spiritual growth. As they learn to walk with God through the ups and downs of life, their faith will be strengthened, and their graces will increase. But this growth does not just happen automatically. We encouraged our children to give diligence to increasing in grace. A useful passage to read is 2 Peter 1:5-11. Specific graces are listed that can help focus our efforts to grow in godliness. This growth will bring great joy and blessings to them in the future years.

Theme 2: Being heavenly minded

General

There is a rather unfortunate expression that is used in Christian circles. Some people are said to be “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” While this expression was no doubt used to encourage Christians to be mindful of the fact that they still lived on earth and that they should be engaged in active ministry, there is much error in the expression. The Lord Jesus Himself encouraged us to be heavenly minded (Matt. 6:19-21). Our hearts and desires are to be focussed on heaven. When they are, we become most useful for works on earth. Note the context of Matthew 6:19-21. It forms the basis for devotion to God (vs. 24), keeps us from being distracted by materialism (vs. 25ff), and enables us to seek the kingdom of God more single-heartedly.

The world needs more heavenly minded people!

Application

As parents, one of our greatest goals is to raise our children to be heavenly minded. During our daily experiences with our children, we try to often remind them to look at the world from a heavenly perspective:

- The toys and gadgets in the shops will not really satisfy them – not for any length of time.
- The latest fashion cannot really make them beautiful inside. The latest clothes will be out of fashion next season as the world’s systems deliberately create a vicious cycle of consumerism and of dependence on their products for “happiness.”

- Popularity is inevitably short lived. They would not die if they missed the next school party at school!

It is our prayer that this devotional guide will be used by parents to train their children to be heavenly minded.

Theme 3: No regrets

General

Little Christian remarks how happy he was that he became a pilgrim and set out to find the Heavenly City. He indicates that all the trouble that he had faced seemed to fade into the past. These are biblical themes. In the light of the glory of heaven, our current affliction is indeed short, light and incomparable (2 Cor. 4:17). Paul reflects on his life as a Christian soldier with absolutely no regrets as he contemplates the reward that awaits him (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Application

Our hearts were deeply concerned for our children as we spoke to them on this issue. We encouraged them and prayed with them about having no regrets. As they grow up, we have often seen their disappointment when they were not allowed to go to certain parties or events because of our Christian standards. They experienced the cost of missing certain sporting events because we prioritised church attendance on a Sunday morning. So we spoke to them about the little pilgrims' statement that they had no regrets about all the difficulties they had suffered because of their pilgrimage. We assured them that if they "lost their lives" for Christ's sake now, they would find it forever (Matt. 10:39). They would never, never regret any one thing they missed out on or suffered for, if it was for Christ's sake (Matt. 5:11). However, while

they were going through these present difficulties, they should strengthen their faith and trust these promises. And as we spoke to our children about these things, our hearts were praying for them!

CHAPTER 46

Theme 1: The fear of death

General

Bunyan depicts death as the Dark River. Little Christian is apprehensive about crossing the river. This speaks to the fact that most people fear death (Heb. 2:14-15). Christians are not immune to such fears. Bunyan no doubt had much pastoral experience with Christians being fearful as they approached their own deaths.

Application

While we dealt with the subject of facing our coming deaths in chapter 48, we used this chapter to do two things. Firstly, we encouraged our children to think about and prepare for their deaths, as it would most certainly happen. One believer said that the biggest fool in the world is someone who does not prepare for something that he knows will most certainly take place. We must have it constantly in our minds that one day we will die and then face the judgement (Heb. 9:27). Far from being morbid, this mind-set helps us focus on those things that are most important and makes us spiritually productive here on earth (see for example 2 Cor. 5:10-11; 2 Pet. 3:11).

Secondly, we warned our children that they may find that fears and doubts will arise as their deaths approach. This would not necessarily mean that they are not Christians. Also, there were things that they can do to help them prepare for their deaths. (More in chapter 48.)

CHAPTER 47

Theme 1: The fate of Ignorance

General

Refer to chapter 38 for a description of the type of person Bunyan has in view regarding Ignorance. This chapter is extremely sad and fearful. The Lord Jesus Himself taught that there would be people who were convinced they would be in heaven one day, only to be disappointed (Matt. 7:21-23). The Bible also speaks of those who are self-deceived (James 1:26; 1 John 1:8), which is a most frightening condition.

Application

We stressed two truths to our children in this chapter. Firstly, we spoke about not taking their Christian walks as something “casual,” “frivolous” or “light.” There are some things, because of their ultimate importance, that we are to be earnest about. We should never play games with God and the Bible. Knowing Christ and belonging to Him is a matter of life and death!

Secondly, lest we burdened our children too much with matters of self-deception so that they despaired of knowing whether they fell into this category or not, we reminded them that Ignorance had deliberately disobeyed the gospel. He had been warned on many occasions that he needed to go via the cross, but he refused, and rather chose to follow his own instincts as opposed to God’s clear instructions. God is not unloving or harsh in rejecting Ignorance. Rather, Ignorance chose to ignore the gospel and the words of Christ, and so brought destruction on himself (Matt. 7:24-27). We must make sure that we submit ourselves to the clearly revealed

teaching of Scripture regarding the gospel and how we are to be saved.

CHAPTER 48

Theme 1: Preparing for death

General

As noted in chapter 46, believers can experience turmoil, confusion and anxiety as their deaths approach. It is therefore important to prepare ourselves now for our coming death.

Application

We spoke to our children about what we could do now to prepare for death. We noted three things. Firstly, the promises of God are tremendously important, as our faith is rooted in and fed by God's promises (Rom. 10:17; Heb. 11:13). They are precious, and we need to have them hidden in our heart and mind. One of the best things you can do as parents is to memorise God's promises with your children.

Secondly, we need to be people of prayer. Hopeful prayed for himself and Little Christian as they crossed the river. We receive strength in prayer (Matt. 26:41).

Thirdly, we must not despise trials. During trials here on earth, we experience God's faithfulness, and so learn to trust and lean on Him. We must consider it joy to go through trials (James 1:2), as these produce character and hope (Rom. 5:3-4). Note that the end result is hope, and in this chapter Bunyan depicts Hopeful as facing this last trial with greater courage than Little Christian. After enduring trials on earth, when we approach this final, great trial of death, we should have already learnt to trust and lean on God through lesser trials, and so will be able to cope with the trial of death more courageously.

CHAPTER 49

Theme 1: The joys of heaven

General

The Bible describes the joys of heaven in many ways (see for example Rev 21). Here Bunyan describes the start of these joys in terms of reward, peace, reunion with saved loved ones, and most importantly, the experiencing the joy of the presence of God.

The blessings of heaven are even greater than we can imagine (1 Cor 2:9). There is a real sense that we cannot comprehend the sheer greatness and utter joyfulness of being in heaven. What is revealed in Scripture is important, however, and we need to meditate on it.

Application

We often encouraged our girls to remember and dwell on the glories and joy of heaven. Especially during times of pain, suffering and hurts, we reminded them that these things were temporary, and that in heaven God will wipe away every tear, and there would be no more pain and hurt.

Theme 2: Acceptance into heaven

General

The bible teaches that those who have not listened to the words of Christ nor done his will (i.e. not listened to the gospel) will be cast away (see Matt 7:21-27; Rom 10:16). Ignorance (refer to chapter 47) was one of those who refused to listen to the words of Christ.

In contrast, Little Christian and Hopeful obeyed the gospel. They received a roll, went in through the narrow gate and went by the way of the cross. For this reason, there is nothing lacking when they get to heaven. They are received, and welcomed, with no disappointments. Their garments are white, indicating that they are clothed with Christ's righteousness (Philippians 3:9) and therefore perfectly safe and completely accepted into heaven (Jude 24).

Application

Many people think they will "wing it" when they get to stand before God. They believe they will be able to make up some clever argument that will either baffle God or so impress Him that he will let them into heaven. This is a sad delusion. We cannot get into heaven without having obeyed the gospel here on earth and received Christ and His righteousness. Those who have not done so will be terrified when the Lord Jesus returns (Rev 6:16). There will be no clever arguments. They are certain to be disappointed and to be cast into hell.

We explained to our children the relief that Little Christian and Hopeful experienced because they had listened and taken to heart Christ's words about the true gospel and only way into heaven. So the final message of this book for our children is: obey the gospel, and receive Christ as the only way back into God's presence. He is the only sure and safe way!

THE END