**The Valley of Humiliation**

Text: Romans 8:37

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 5:6-11; Job 26; Romans 8:31-39

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 399, 491, 44, 492, 302

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress (#7)

**Theme:**  The Christian more than conquers the enemies of God through the strength of Christ, the Saviour of all those He loves.

**Proposition:**  Brothers and sisters, face the spiritual fight with confidence in Christ your conqueror.

**Introduction**

Have you ever felt somewhat sad and deflated when you return to a worldly workplace, or you are out and about in your neighbourhood on a Monday after a day of heavenly worship and fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ? In times past, I remember leaving our churches’ national family camp after a week of spiritual refreshment and enrichment and experiencing an anticlimactic sense of coming back down to the realities of this world as I left to go back to ‘normal life’.

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian has experienced rich rest and refreshment in fellowship with Watchful, Discretion, Prudence, Piety and Charity in The Palace Beautiful – representing the local church. We saw in the previous sermon in this series:

* That meeting together as a church regularly is vital for sustaining a strong steady walk with the Lord as we journey towards our final destination.
* That we all need to be regularly encouraged, exhorted, comforted and, at times, admonished.
* That we all need to be regularly equipped for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12).
* That we all need to study together the ancient records in Scripture of the Lord’s great works in the past.
* That we all need to see again together, by faith, from a distance, the glorious land that the Lord has promised will one day be our eternal home.
* That we all need the help of one another to put on the whole armour of God so that we may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph 6:11).

The local church is like a field hospital in a warzone. She is an oasis for rest and refreshment facilitating healing, equipping and strengthening of the saints for the battles that lie ahead (Eph 4:12-13). So it was for Christian as he left the Palace Beautiful, wearing the armour he had been given and descending down into the Valley of Humiliation. There he met an enemy of God called Apollyon. Today, our focus is on these words of confident encouragement from Romans 8:37: “*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*”. Our three sermon points this morning are:

1. A fierce fight
2. A humbling fight
3. A victorious fight
4. **A fierce fight**

As Christian enters the Valley of Humiliation, he sees coming toward him a "foul fiend" named Apollyon — a hideous monster with scales like a fish, wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, a mouth like a lion with fire and smoke pouring out of a hole in his belly. A ‘fiend’ is an evil spirit or demon. The foul fiend Apollyon who attacks Christian is the Destroyer. This monster is the embodiment of evil. He is described in Revelation 9:11as *“the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon*” (ref. also Job 26:6; Prov 15:11). (The name Apollyon also occurs in St. Bevis of Southampton, a chivalric romance that was one of Bunyan's favourites). For the physical characteristics of his giant monster, Bunyan used his imagination but also drew on descriptions of other creatures mentioned in the Bible. {This together with such works as ‘The Seven Champions of Christendom’, published about a century before and often read by Bunyan.

In The Pilgrims Progress, Apollyon asks Christian: "*Where have you come from, and where are you going?*" When Christian replies that he is coming from the City of Destruction and bound for the City of Zion, Apollyon points out that he is the prince and god of the City of Destruction and all the surrounding territory. He says that Christian is therefore one of his subjects and owes him obedience, that this pilgrim should obey his command and turn around and go home. Christian refuses, announcing his intention of continuing "*in the King's highway, the way of holiness*."

With that, Apollyon blocks the path and attacks Christian with a flaming dart, which Christian deflects with his shield. Then comes a shower of flaming darts, "thick as hail," inflicting many wounds. Christian's sword is useless to him, for Apollyon stays out of reach as he moves around hurling his darts. This is a graphic picture of spiritual warfare, drawn in part from Ephesians 6:10-18. “*We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*” (Eph 6:12). The Heidelberg Catechism also speaks of this fierce spiritual battle in these words from LD52A127: ‘*Our sworn enemies – the devil, the world and our own flesh – never stop attacking us*’.

Apollyon represents Satan, the enemy who ‘*prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*’ (1 Pet 5:8). He is viciously evil and actively harmful. He is the ‘god of this age’ who seeks to corrupt people and lead them to their destruction. Satan receives relatively little direct attention in the pages of Scripture, but whenever he appears, his evil character and wicked actions are always evident.

* In the garden of Eden, in the form of a serpent, he schemed to undermine confidence in the truthfulness and sufficiency of God’s Word: “*Did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?*”, “*You will not surely die*” (Gen 3:1; 4). His evil aim was to tempt Adam and Eve so that they would sin and then die.
* Aware of the blameless, upright and God-fearing character of Job, Satan desired to attack him. With the Lord’s consent, he took Job’s property and his children (Job 1) and then his health (Job 2). The only reason why he did not take Job’s life was the Lord’s protective command (Job 2:6). His aim was to destroy Job’s faith and to bring about his death.
* When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, Satan targeted the same areas as he had done with Old Testament Israel during their forty years of wandering between Egypt and the promised land: physical needs, pride, and the desire for possessions (cf. 1 John 2:16).

Brothers and sisters, friends, the Devil is a ferocious attacker. He is the Evil One who uses destructive weapons in his attempts to bring about the fall of those who would stand against his schemes. In Ephesians 6:16, the Apostle Paul uses the imagery of physical fiery arrows or darts to describe the spiritual weapons of Satan. Satan’s aim was for Jesus to fall and fail in His mission to rescue a people from the domain of darkness and transfer them into His kingdom (Col 1:13). However, Jesus was not overcome by Satan because all the fiery arrows that the Evil One fired at Him were repelled. Jesus truly is the strong man. Whereas you and me? – not so much, in fact we are very weak, which brings us to our second point:

1. **A humbling fight**

It is true that the spiritual war in which we are engaged will not end until we are at peace with the Lord in death, however, there are particular seasons where the battle is more intense than at other times. This is what John Bunyan pictures as Christian fights with Apollyon for more than half a day. He writes that “*Toward the end, growing weaker and weaker from loss of blood, Christian has to give way a step or two, at which the monster rushes at him, knocks the sword from his hand, and throws him down, pinning his shoulders to the ground*”. It looks like Christian is no match for his evil opponent.

Fighting our ‘sworn enemies’ – the devil, the unbelieving world and our sinful flesh – is humbling because we ourselves do not have the strength to overcome. I think that this is why John Bunyan pictures this fight taking place in The Valley of Humiliation. Humiliation is being ‘*reduced to a lower position either in your own eyes or in the eyes of another*’. It is humiliating to have your shoulders pinned to the ground by a stronger opponent. It is humbling to know that you cannot stop all the arrows of your enemy because, at times, you do not employ your shield of faith well.

Some of Satan’s fiery arrows bring to our minds the remembrance of our past sins. Something like this perhaps: *"Oh pathetic Christian,* *surely it is not possible that such sins as yours can be blotted out. Think of the number of your transgressions: how you have sinned against light and knowledge; doing what you knew to be wrong and still enjoying the experience at the time. You have despised the grace of God; you have trampled upon the blood of Christ; how can there be any forgiveness for you?*"

The Evil One is also the ‘Tempter’ (Matt 4:3; 1 Thess 3:5). Some of his fiery arrows target our unholy passions, lusts and evil desires. Something like this perhaps: “*You deserve to indulge yourself. You are missing out*”; “*You are feeling low, have some more … and you’ll feel better*”; “*You’ve done well, celebrate with ….*”

The Evil One is also proud (Isa 14:12-15). He always puts himself first. So his flaming darts can result in us thinking that we are always right, and that our own interests are more important than the interests of others. We might become angry when others are inconsiderate or rude. Our reactions to the small inconveniences of life such as when someone cuts you off in traffic, is late for an appointment, or forgets your birthday can show that a fiery arrow has aroused your self-righteousness and that pride is ruling your heart.

The Evil One is also a schemer (Eph 6:11) who fights with subtle deception. His flaming arrows distract us from focusing on Christ. You might be in prayer and distractions flood into your mind resulting in evil thoughts, notions and ideas which disrupt your focus. You might find it strangely difficult to concentrate on reading the Bible, whereas you can be fully engaged in a novel, a movie or some online content for extended periods of time. You may have energy for your own pleasures and pursuits, but can feel tired and unmotivated by acts of service for the Lord.

The Evil One is also a liar (John 8:44). His arrows sow doubt in the heart about the truth of God. Something like this perhaps: *Is the whole Bible really true? So many scientists have ‘proven’ that evolution is the cause of life. The miracles in Scripture couldn’t have happened. Have you ever seen a dead person brought back to life? “Does God really love you?” “Is there really going to be a perfect New Heaven and New Earth in the future?”, “You are not a real Christian, are you? you will never be one”.*

These spiritual fiery darts are real, and they can cause much pain and anguish in the human soul. The Heidelberg catechism helpfully notes (LD52A127) that ‘*By ourselves we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment*’. Bunyan writes that Apollyon had almost pressed Christian to death, so that Christian began to despair of his life.

The Apostle Paul experienced the humiliation of being hard pressed as he served the Lord, experiencing ‘countless beatings’, shipwrecks, dangers, sleepless nights, hunger and cold (ref. 2 Cor 11:25-27). He knew that he was weak (2 Cor 11:30). Together with the other Apostles he had become ‘*a spectacle to the world*’, ‘*fools for Christ’s sake*’ (1 Cor 4:9-10).

Engaging in spiritual battle is deeply humbling, it is profoundly humiliating. Perhaps the first casualty in this conflict is our pride. This is one of the blessings of the humbling fight against the Evil One. The Apostle Paul wrote “*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness*” (2 Cor 12:9). How about you? Are you glad that the spiritual battles of this life often show up your weakness and ongoing need for the Lord’s strength and grace? Brothers and sisters, spiritual warfare is fierce and humbling, but we have a Champion who has won the war for us, which brings us to our third point:

1. **A victorious fight**

Thinking each breath will be his last, Christian reaches out a hand, fortunately he finds his sword within reach, and plunges it into his tormentor. Apollyon jumps up and staggers back, with Christian after him, hoping to bury his sword in his heart. But the monster escapes by taking to his dragon wings and flying off, threatening to be back again to deal with Christian. This mirrors our reading from Job 26 when we heard this suffering saint exclaim: "*How you have helped him who has no power! How you have saved the arm that has no strength!*”

For Christian, this bout of the spiritual battle was over. The sword that dealt the decisive blow to Satan was ‘*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*’ (Eph 6:17). First and foremost, the Bible, God’s Word reveals the gospel. Earlier in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote: “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*” (Rom 1:16). “*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight*” (Rom 3:20). *“those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified”* (Rom 8:30).

Then Paul asks a whole serious of questions (v31-35): *“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”*

God fights for all who believe in His Son. Jesus Christ was given up so that He would win the war against the Devil, the unbelieving world and the sinful human flesh. Surely, you and I would be fools if we did not see our need of a Conqueror like Jesus? One who has fiercely, humbly and victoriously fought on your behalf so that you can receive the prize of life, peace, joy and hope forever. Have **you** come to the Victorious Christ in repentance and faith?

God secures all His children so that whilst they may fail and fall multiple times on their way to glory, yet no one will snatch them out of His hand (John 10:28-29). Be fully assured brothers and sisters that “*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Phil 1:6). All of this, and more, is why Paul writes in our text: 8:37: “*No, in all these things we are* ***more than conquerors*** *through him who loved us*”. The single Greek word translated ‘more than conquerors’ is not used anywhere else in the Bible. It emphasizes that, **not only** are Christian believers victorious through Christ their Lord and Saviour ‘who loved us’, **but also** that the battles of this life are used by God for our good (8:28).

Imagine that you are in a boxing ring facing an opponent who is larger, stronger, fitter and more skilled in throwing punches than you are. You take a beating as blow after blow painfully impacts on your weakening body. Eventually, as you lie exhausted and broken on the mat, the strongest of men comes into the ring beats your opponent and then lifts you up and declares you the winner of the prize. But not only that, as you heal from your wounds, you grow stronger as, with gratitude, you boast in the strength of the One who fought for you.

Brothers and sisters, “*we are* ***more than conquerors*** *through him who loved us*”. Christ Jesus fought for us in the valley of His humiliation. Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Days 14-16 focus on the work of Christ in not clinging to His rightful honour and glory as the divine Son of God, but instead taking the form of a suffering servant (ref. Phil 2:6-8) This ‘humiliation of Christ’ includes His birth (LD14), His suffering (LD15), His death (LD 15) and His burial (LD16). It seemed at the cross as though Satan had won the victory against Christ. There Jesus ‘*breathed his last*’ (Luke 23:46).

Was the fight too fierce for Him? No. He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). He laid down His own life willingly, nobody took it from Him (John 10:18). Was the fight too humbling for Him? No. He rose from the grave thereby showing that He had conquered death, the penalty for sin – not His own – for He has none, but for those who believe on Him. He is the Conqueror and we, brothers and sisters, are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Our fight, like that of Christian against Apollyon, though fierce and humbling is, in the end, a victorious one. Job prophetically declared the power of God over death and Satan, saying: “*Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon (that is Apollyon in Greek) has no covering*” (26:6). When Christian’s battle was over, he gave thanks to the Lord for delivering him ‘out of the mouth of the lion’.

John Bunyan then writes: “*Then there came to him a Hand with some of the leaves of the tree of life, the which Christian took and applied to the wounds that he had received in the battle and was healed immediately. He also sat down in that place to eat bread, and to drink of the bottle that was given to him a little before; so being refreshed, he addressed himself to his journey, with his sword drawn in his hand; for he said, ‘I know not but some other enemy may be at hand’*”. Christian had been given a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine and a cluster of raisins by the residents of the Palace Beautiful to sustain him on his way. So it is that the Lord strengthens us with spiritual food and godly fellowship as we meet together as a church gathered.

May the Lord equip and empower you for the journey ahead, praying the prayer that we find at the end of Heidelberg Catechism LD52A127 ‘*And so, Lord, uphold us and make us strong with the strength of your Holy Spirit, so that we may not go down to defeat in this spiritual struggle, but may firmly resist our enemies until we finally win the complete victory*’.

AMEN.