

Traversing the Valley of Humiliation

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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Prayer of Illumination

Holy Spirit, give us openness
and give us understanding
of what each one of us needs
to receive through Holy Scripture.
When we're facing a difficult choice
between the easy and the right decision,
help us to choose the narrow path.
We also pray for all who are about to
set on an adventurous journey of faith
anywhere in the world.
Amen.

Introduction: *Pilgrim's Progress*

So last week we saw how Christian successfully reached the top of the **Hill of Difficulty**, with some ups and downs along the way. Well, Christian pressed on toward the **Palace Beautiful**, hoping that he might lodge there for the night.

...



On his way there Christian spotted the two dreaded lions that **Mistrust** and **Fearful** ran from last week. As you can imagine, panic flooded Christian's soul. But then he heard a voice call out—"Have no fear of the lions, for they are chained. Stay on the **Holy Way**—right in the middle—and they will not be able to touch you."

It was the doorkeeper of the **Palace Beautiful** named **Watchful**. The lions roared, snarled, and jumped at Christian—but they did him no harm because he stayed the course in the path's center. Christian clapped his hands with joy, and then asked the doorkeeper if he might lodge at the **Palace Beautiful** for the night.

"What is your name and where are you coming from?"

My name is Christian, but originally my name was **Graceless**. I was born in the **City of Destruction**, but I am on a journey to the **Celestial City**." Yes, yes, come in and find shelter. Now there were four women who tended the **Palace Beautiful**—**Discretion**, **Prudence**, **Devotion**, and **Charity**. They greeted Christian with a smile—"Come in, come in. Find rest here for the night."



They provided supper for Christian and asked him to share of his journeys, aspirations, and difficulties. With kind eyes they listened, asked many questions, and gave good counsel. They then

directed Christian to the bedchamber reserved for him and the name of the room was **Peace**—and what a restful sleep he had, waking up refreshed in the morning.

After breakfast, the four virtuous women showed Christian a view from the **Palace**—in the distance was the **Land of Immanuel**, basking in the light of the **Celestial City**. They then guided Christian to the **Equipment Room**, giving him a double-edged sword, helmet, shield, breastplate, belt, and shoes that would not wear out for his journey ahead.

They also gave Christian a tour of the **Museum** containing Moses' Rod, Samson's jawbone of a donkey, and the sling and stone used by David to slay Goliath.



After packing up his things, the four women walked Christian down the rest of the **Hill of Difficulty**. **Charity** and **Prudence** steadied Christian a time or two when he lost his footing. Before departing, they gave gifts to Christian: bread, drink, and a cluster of raisins. Christian said his goodbyes.

It wasn't long before he reached the **Valley of Humiliation**. And a foul fiend named **Apollyon** (*which means Destroyer*) made his way towards Christian. Christian thought about retreating, but his armor offered no protection for his back. His only option was to encounter this most hideous creature head on.



Apollyon was clothed with scales like a fish—this was pride. He had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, a mouth like a lion, and smoke and sulfur spewed from his belly. When he came to Christian, he began to question him and treat him with disdain. “Where are you from and where are you going?”

“I am from the **City of Destruction** and am going to **Mt. Zion**.”

“**Destruction**, you say? That means you’re one of my subjects, for all that country is mine. I’m the prince and god of that region. So why are you running away from your king? I won’t destroy you yet—I have use of you. Go back to your hometown.”

Christian stood his ground.

“I have sworn my allegiance to the **King of Princes**. How could I possibly go back on my word—I’d be a traitor?”

“Well—you did that to me, living in the **City of Destruction**. I will take you back.”

“No, I stand under the banner of the **King of Princes**, and he has absolved me of all the charges you hold against me. And I like his leadership, services, and government better than yours. Stop trying to change my mind—I am the Lord’s servant and have made up my mind to follow him.”

A wisp of smoke curled from **Apollyon’s** nostrils. “That’s well and good, but you’ll think differently when things aren’t going so well. And don’t forget **Graceless** how you nearly went under at the **Swamp of Despond**. And how you overslept and lost your scroll on the **Hill of Difficulty**. And you just about turned back and ran away from the lions. And... not to mention you’re always wanting attention and accolades from others for starting this pilgrimage of yours—shame on you.”

“The Prince I serve, O **Apollyon**, is merciful and ever ready to forgive.”

The **Destroyer** flew into a rage and hurled a flaming dart at Christian, but he was able to block it with his shield.

“Watch your step **Apollyon**, for you are walking on the **Holy Way**.”

With that, the creature threw himself at Christian forcefully—inflicting wounds to his head, hand, and foot. They wrestled for nearly half of the day—Christian was exhausted, yet he pressed on fearlessly. **Apollyon** then threw Christian to the ground—preparing to inflict a mortal wound with his sword. He roared and Christian sighed and moaned and despaired for his life.

But then, in that moment, Christian found the strength to grip his sword of the **Spirit**, and he roared,

“Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy, though I fall I will rise.”

And with the sword that **Charity** gave Christian, he felled the fiend. **Apollyon** spread his dragon wings and quickly took to flight and Christian no longer saw him. Exhausted, he gave thanks and everlasting praise to the **One** who saw him through.

“I will bless your holy name always.”

And then a hand appeared, offering to Christian leaves from the **Tree of Life**. Christian accepted them and applied the leaves to his battle wounds. He then drank from the bottle and ate the bread that was given him. After his respite, Christian continued along his journey, vigilant for other dangers that might come his way. The rest of his trek through the **Valley of Humiliation** remained quiet.

Scripture: Romans 10:9-13 (NLT)

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.” Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Traversing the Valley of Humiliation

This has been an intense week, hasn't it? We not only experienced Tuesday night's debate, but the news of our President and the First Lady and others high up in leadership testing positive—our prayers are with them. These are incredibly difficult times in our country—where we need to come together as a nation. As we near the November election, it can be tempting to act more like animals than humans—usually a donkey or an elephant. Or maybe a bull or a bear. But the truth is, we need to remember that we're human beings. Americans who live in the USA with our fellow countrymen.

In times such as these, our country can't forget our national symbol—another animal—the American eagle. Those other animals can't fly, but the eagle can fly—and it needs its right wing and left wing to work together to soar. The key to our unity is that we remember that our country is bigger than our party and we need each other. We care about our whole country—not just our party. We put aside our differences and work together and move forward. We're all American eagles right now.

Paul in our passage is talking about a similar idea—a bigger idea, an eternal idea, regarding the church and the family of God. He's trying to bring together two very different people—Jews and

Gentiles, to live together in community and harmony. How can they be one? How can they be unified in the midst of their differences?

For Paul, the answer is simple: Christ. Yes, we have many races, differing theologies, and political perspectives. These are good and natural. But our ultimate and primary identity is that we're sheep and Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we follow his voice. He protects us from the lions and the wolves. Jesus is the One who helps us come together and be nourished around the Table.

Paul reminds us our decisive and defining identity is not

- our denominational stripe
- or political party,
- or national flag.

But our formative identity is that we are Christians who follow the crucified Christ and proclaim the risen Christ. We believe that Jesus not only lived, but that he lives. We don't just know about him, but we come to know him. We don't just study a historical figure, we encounter and commune with his presence. We die and Christ lives in us and through us.

World Communion Sunday reminds us what unites the church universal: across countries, eras, languages, races, and political systems. It's in Christ that very different Christians have communion. Christ is bigger and more substantial than our differences. He is the suture that stitches together our gaping wounds. His nail-scarred hands bring healing to our brokenness. In him, division is transformed into depth of devotion and richness of perspective. As the saying goes:

- In essentials—unity.
- In non-essentials-liberty.
- In all things, charity.

Christ accepts us and teaches us to accept one another. But he changes us too—our name has been changed. We once were called Graceless or Disgraced. We're now called Christian. The past is forgiven. The future is new and possible and open. Grace has entered our story. We're on an adventure together. This is a miracle of God and we could never accomplish it ourselves. This doesn't mean that we're clones or replicas. But we are in the same boat. We're united in that we all need to be rescued—rescued from evil within and evil without. On our own, we're adrift—lost at sea. Lost our moorings.

Like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, we have hope when we cry out to Christ and we lean upon our companions. Hope that we'll make it through these dangers, toils, and snares. And these hardships bind us to Christ, to one another. We're united in our one Lord, one faith, one baptism—we are one body in Christ Jesus. Christ and Christ alone makes us right with God and one another. We believe, as Paul says, not just with lip service, but we believe deep down from the heart. "Jesus is Lord" is one of the oldest confessions of faith for the church. To confess the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord is to pledge our ultimate loyalty to the Lord. We give our crucified and risen Lord supreme place in our lives individually as Christians and collectively as the church. We pledge our allegiance—our obedience and our worship to Christ, and not to any political figure or "lower case G" god or "lower

case L" lord. Christ is the big C, and as Christians we're little c's—little christ. The Lord we serve is the Lord whom God raised from the dead.

There are many lords out there that vie for our attention and allegiance—like Christian's encounter with **Apollyon—Destroyer**. But only one Lord is raised from the dead—it's that one that we bow the knee to. It's this Lord that rescues, saves, and delivers us, the world, from dangers within and dangers without. It's this Lord that rescues us from slumber, slipping, snarling lions, and Satan himself. And this Lord welcomes all—he will not turn us away.

As Paul says, "we have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him." We are different, but we call on the same Lord. We have the greatest thing in common—we have life in the same Savior! Jesus is our highest common denominator! He raises the bar, rather than lowers the bar for our unity! He will not let us be overcome by shame, humiliation, or disgrace.

Like Christian, we're going to make it through the **Swamp of Despond**, over the **Hill of Difficulty**, and across the **Valley of Humiliation**. Christ the Lord will see us to the **Land of Immanuel**, to **Mt. Zion**, and to the **Celestial City**. This is the secret to our unity, the secret to our connection. Call on Christ. Witness to Christ. Count on Christ. It's good for our mouths to witness and good for the ears of those who hear the good news—it's the healing leaves of the **Tree of Life**.

We have our different ways of calling on Christ and witnessing to Christ—different languages, cultures, personalities, generations, genders, races, styles, and tastes. And that's good. But when it comes down to it, we're the same kind of different in Christ Jesus. In word and deed we share and show this good news that we have peace with God in Christ Jesus. No matter who we are—we will not be disgraced. It's God, who raised Christ the Lord from the dead, that will get us through. Past ourselves, past the lions on either side of us, past the attacks and shaming of **Apollyon**. And forward—forward into joy. Forward into the future. Forward into life everlasting.

Amen.

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