“Now I saw in my dream that, just as they had finished speaking, they came to a very miry slough (a place of deep mud or mire) that was in the middle of the plain. Being careless, they both suddenly fell into the mire. The name of the slough was Despond. They wallowed in it for a while, and were grieving that they were smeared with dirt. Christian began to sink in the mire because of the burden that was on his back.”
Defining *Slough*

- The literal meaning of a *slough* is “a piece of soft, miry, or muddy ground; especially a place or hole in a road or way filled with wet mud or mire” (OED).
- The figurative meaning is “a state or condition (especially of moral degradation) in which a person, etc. sinks or has sunk” (OED).
- This is the first obstacle in Christian’s course.
Pliable’s Return to the City

Pliable has rejected Obstinate’s appeal to return with him to the City of Destruction and goes on with Christian until they fall into a bog. After wallowing in it for a while, Pliable becomes extremely angry and struggles to get out of the mire on the side closest to his home. Christian never sees him again.
What is the *Slough of Despond*?

• First of all, do not be surprised that this is a very much misunderstood section of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

• It represents Bunyan’s biblical and theological understanding of an important doctrine that is rarely taught, even in evangelical circles.

• If we will remain “in the story,” we will begin to see what part it plays in many people’s lives.
A Quick Test

The Slough of Despond is:

A. The conviction of sin
B. A necessary experience for all believers
C. A desirable experience for every believer
D. An indication of unbelief
E. Feelings of discouragement or depression
F. All of the above
G. None of the above
“This miry slough cannot be fixed. When a person feels the conviction of his sins, all the scum and filth that comes with this conviction runs from the hill down into this slough. Therefore, it is called the Slough of Despond. As the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, many fears and doubts arise in his heart. Also one may feel anxiety that discourages even further. All of these get together and settle in this place.”
What is the *Slough of Despond*?

- The slough is not (A) the conviction of sin. Christian is already under conviction for his sins – this happened in the opening paragraphs of the allegory.
- The language of conviction is seen in Bunyan’s description of Christian from the beginning: he is troubled, distressed, disturbed, crying, and asks the question, “What must I do to be saved?”
What is the *Slough of Despond*?

• Bunyan tells us that the slough is all the **scum and filth** that comes with this conviction. When the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, many **fears and doubts** arise in his heart. Also, one may feel **anxiety** that discourages even further.

• The *Slough of Despond* is not a necessary experience (B). There were stones through the slough on which the pilgrim’s could walk.
What is the *Slough of Despond*?

- The *Slough of Despond* is not a desirable experience (C). When Christian fell into the bog, he was hindered from continuing on his journey to the Cross. The slough is a hindrance to faith and salvation.

- The experience of the slough occurs to some, but not all, people.
What is the *Slough of Despond*?

- It is a mental, emotional, and spiritual state into which people fall because of their foolish fear, carelessness, and unbelief.
- When the gospel of Jesus Christ is not faithfully taught and preached, the slough is a natural consequence. This is especially true when the law is relentlessly pressed on a sinner’s conscience.
The Slough of Despond

“The Slough of Despond represents those discouraging fears which often harass new converts...When the diligent student of the Scriptures obtains such an acquaintance with the perfect holiness of God, the spirituality of his law, the inexpressible evil of sin, and his own obligations and transgressions, as greatly exceeds the measure in which he discerns the free and full salvation of the gospel, his
humiliation will verge nearer and nearer to despondency. This, however, is not essential to repentance, but arises from misapprehension: though few in proportion wholly escape it. The mire of the slough represents that idea which desponding persons entertain of themselves and their situation, as altogether vile and loathsome; and their confessions and self-abasing complaints, which render them contemptible in
the opinion of others. As every attempt to rescue themselves discovers to them more of the latent evil of their hearts, they seem to grow worse and worse; and, for want of a clear understanding of the gospel, they have no firm ground to tread on, and know neither where they are, or what they must do.”

- Thomas Scott
Why Christian Fell into the Slough of Despond?

“In this Slough of Despond there were good and firm steps, sound promises to stand upon, a causeway, indeed, better than adamant (surpassing hardness), clear across the treacherous quagmires; but mark you, fear followed Christian so hard, that he fled the nearest way, and fell in, not stopping to look for the steps, or not thinking of them. Now this is often just the operation of fear; it sets the threatenings against the promises, when it
Why Christian Fell into the Slough of Despond?

ought simply to direct the soul from the threatenings to the promises. That is the object of the threatenings, to make the promises shine, and to make the soul lay hold upon them; and that is the purpose and the tendency of a salutary fear of the Divine wrath on account of sin, to make the believer flee directly to the promises, and advance on them to Christ. But in general, men under conviction of sin, having
Why Christian Fell into the *Slough of Despond*?

more desire to escape from hell than to get to Christ, more desire to be relieved of their distresses than to become holy, are blinded by the very fears which should have pointed out the promises; and, without looking narrowly for those steps, they struggle for relief rather than holiness, for comfort rather than Christ, and so fall deeper into difficulty. Just so in all applications that we make of any remedies but
Why Christian Fell into the Slough of Despond?

the gospel, in all directions that we go for relief but just to Christ, and with all the physicians we can have without him, our sickness of sin and misery never grows better, but rather grows worse. Flying from our fears, we fly only into greater guilt and fear, if we do not flee to Christ. Struggling to be rid of our burden, it only sinks us deeper in the mire, if we do not rest by faith upon the promises, and so come indeed to
Why Christian Fell into the Slough of Despond?

Christ. Precious promises they are, and so free and full of forgiveness and eternal life, that certainly the moment a dying soul feels its guilt and misery, that soul may lay hold upon them, and find Christ in them; and were it not for unbelief, there need be no Slough of Despond for the soul to struggle and plunge in its mire of depravity.”

- Dr. G.B. Cheever
The Good & Substantial Steps

“True, there are certain good and substantial steps that go through the very center of the slough. They were put there by the direction of the Lawgiver. But this place, at times, spews out so much filth that these steps can hardly be seen. Even if they are seen, some men get dizzy and miss their step. They, then, become bogged down and lose their focus.”
The Good & Substantial Steps

• It is necessary to go over the Slough of Despond when traveling from the City of Destruction to the Wicket-gate.

• The steps are the promises of God which are found in His Word.

• It is impossible to mend the slough as long as there is unbelief in the hearts of pilgrims (failure to walk on the steps).
The Good & Substantial Steps

• When the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, sinners will not believe and walk on the stones until the Holy Spirit regenerates the heart and gives real saving faith to them.

• There are preachers and teachers who labor to keep people struggling and wallowing under the threat of the law until the preacher thinks they are sufficiently convicted and humbled.
The Good & Substantial Steps

• Some labor to get everyone into the slough as deeply as possible, but give no help at all in getting anyone out of the slough.

• At a Bible conference, a woman told her story in this way, “Our pastor pushed us into the slough, shoved our head under, and when we tried to claw our way out, he tramped on our fingers while beating us over the head with the law.”
The Only Solution

The only solution for the slough is for us to receive the free grace of God for ourselves and to faithfully share the gospel of Jesus Christ with unbelievers.
Romans 8:15

- “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”
- “No longer are you oppressed with fear as you were when you were still living in paganism or in Judaism, with their emphasis on all the rules one has to keep in order to be saved” (William Hendriksen).
“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.”
“You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

Psalm 40:2