

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS: 1a
The Incredible Journey
Of The
Church Age Believer

INTRO: I welcome you to this series of messages, "Pilgrim's Progress: The Journey of the Church Age Believer." I invite you to turn to Phil. 3:20-21 (read). It was after doing a message on this passage that this series was born. The story of Pilgrim's Progress is an allegorical story. I want to give you the real story of Pilgrim's progress. John Bunyan's story gives in allegorical form, man's journey from the time that conviction of sin first sets in until he crosses the river of death. I want to give you that part of the Pilgrim's progress as well but like Paul Harvey, I want to give you the rest of the story. We are not in a hurry. Our study of this journey will take some time. This is not an allegory, this is the real story. In some places the Scriptures do not appear to give much information. In such places it is easy to speculate. I will seek to keep speculation to a minimum and where I do speculate I will try to alert you to the speculation. Also, where views differ I will seek to give you the major views.

John Bunyan's allegory pictures the life of the Christian until death, when he enters heaven. In our series, that only speaks of what I call the first phase of the church age believer's journey. In this series of messages we will be looking at the journey of the Church age believer in four phases. The first phase is from the time of personal salvation until death. The second to fourth phases deal with the hereafter. Speaking of the hereafter reminds me of a pastor who spoke with an elderly lady regarding life hereafter. He was concerned that she should be prepared to die. He said, "Lady, do you ever give thought to the hereafter?" The elderly lady looked puzzled for a moment then her face brightened and she said, "Oh I surely do pastor. I'm always thinking about the hereafter." Sometimes I go to the kitchen, sometimes I go outside, sometimes I go to the pantry and I say, 'Oh my, what am I hereafter?"

In phases 2 through 4 we will be speaking of the "hereafter" that the pastor was referring to, our existence after this life. Surely the apostle Paul is right when he says that if in this life only we have hope we are of all men most miserable.

In each of the four phases we will look at how that part of the journey is commenced, or how it is begun. Then we will look at how it is continued and finally, how it is completed. Each part of the journey commences at a particular point, continues for a certain duration of time and is completed at a certain point, with the exception of the last phase. In phase one we will look at that part of the Pilgrim's progress that John Bunyan described in his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

I. PHASE 1: THE BELIEVER'S INITIAL EARTHLY JOURNEY

A. Commenced at the Cross - Doctrine of Justification

In these first two messages I will be using Matthew 7:13-14 from time to time (read).

1. The background to the cross

Everybody who lives is on the journey of life. This journey begins at conception and ends at death. All people conceived travel this journey and all those who reach, what we call the age of accountability, travel this road which ends in hell. It all began for man in the Garden of Eden. The Lord had set out for man two paths; the path of obedience which led to life and the path of disobedience which ended in death. Satan, the archenemy of God beguiled Eve through the subtle serpent, and Satan led Adam to sin through Eve. Something horrible happened to mankind there in Eden. When Adam sinned his nature changed. Instead of God given innocence, a sin nature was born within Adam, and through Adam was passed on to all mankind.

The journey of life is traveled by and large on what the Bible calls the broad road to destruction. Now before anybody ever begins the journey of the Church age believer there is something that must happen. I want to describe that event that must happen to all who would enter the narrow road to life. Permit me to read it to you from John Bunyan's book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The first paragraph in John Bunyan's book, written some 300 years ago goes like this: "*As I walked through the wilderness of this*

world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and, not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, 'What shall I do?'"

The name for Pilgrim's experience is called conviction. Conviction of sin must lay hold of every would be pilgrim. Every boy or girl, man or woman who has reached an age we call the age of accountability must come to a time of conviction before they enter the narrow road. All of Adam and Eve's posterity are sinners and that includes everybody in the world.

Man's dilemma is sin. Sin cannot enter heaven and must be taken care of if man is to enter the eternal abode of God. Sin is a damnable thing. Sin found out is a crushing thing. My wife tells a story of her school years. There was a certain boy who from time to time pulled the school fire alarm. Of course everybody evacuated only to find out that there was no fire. They could not catch the guilty culprit. Time after time this happened. finally the police were called in. The police put a powder on the handles of all the fire alarms. After some time the fire alarm went off again. After this false alarm the police and the school were on the lookout for something. The powder the police had put on the fire alarm handles turned to a purple color and went into the skin so that it could not be removed. In that school was one desperate boy. His fingers were turning purple. Such panic struck the boy that he tried to cut his skin off with a knife, but all to no avail. Of course it was not difficult to find out who always pulled the fire alarms.

Sin, like that powder, leaves a purple stain in the soul, and the Bible says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die!" Oh the horrors of the

guilt of sin. Oh the horrors of the moment of sin discovered! I ask you this morning, have you like Pilgrim come to the place where you said, "What shall I do?" Oh the horrors of sin's consequences. The horrors of eternal hell fire. Have you heard the blood curdling screams of helpless, hopeless cries of hell?

The journey we are speaking of is not begun, unless one has first come to deep conviction of sin. And the Gospel, the good news, never truly becomes good news until I find therein deliverance from sin, and the guilt of sin. So let us look at:

2. The provision of the cross

Adam and Eve had fallen into sin. When the presence of God came near they frantically tried to cover their nakedness. Have you ever been caught in some shameful act? Then you know a little of the feeling Adam and Eve had. You know a little of the feeling the boy with purple fingers had. The guilt of sin is almost a hell of its own. Oh the torments of guilt. Well, Adam and Eve, like all guilty mankind, tried to cover their sin. It is ever the way of mankind to cover sin. God's way is to expose it and deal with it. Notice the sin and the excuses in Genesis 3:8-13.

Now Adam and Eve tried to cover themselves with leaves. A covering made of vegetation. It is ever the mistake of mankind to cover their sin with works with something that is not prescribed by God. Adam and Eve tried to cover themselves with leaves. Cain brought a sacrifice of vegetables. Every person caught under the conviction of sin wants to try to cover up and earn his way back to God. In our day we want to get baptized and join church or other such things. I must tell you that no matter how good your works, if they are done to earn salvation, they are called by the Bible "dead works."

In Genesis 3:21 Adam and Eve got saved. Let me show you how it happened. Their own covering of leaves had to be removed and replaced by a

covering provided by God. So it is with us. We cannot provide our own covering, we must take the one provided for us. Notice that Adam and Eve's covering was made of skins. Now in order for them to be covered by skins, blood had to be shed. Some animal had to die. Some innocent animal that had nothing to do with their sin had to give its life so Adam and Eve could be covered. That is the Old Testament picture of the death of Christ the Lamb of God. Last, notice that in order to wear this clothing they had to submit to God's provision. Therein they were saved. In order for you and I to be saved we must take off our clothes of good works and submit to God's provision for sin, the blood of His only Son.

All through the Old Testament people were saved by faith in Christ as pictured by the blood sacrifices. By this they indicated their faith in the work Christ would do someday. It was not the blood of the animals that forgave their sins but their faith in the blood of Christ pictured by the blood of the animals. All of these sacrifices pictured the cross where Jesus would shed His own blood for us.

And then, Paul writes in Galatians, "But when the fulness of time had come, God sent forth His Son..." (Gal. 4:4). And then, when man had done his work, God's Son hung on the cross of Calvary.

3. The way of the cross

We have taken as a theme for the first two messages Matthew 7:13-14. I want you to notice again that it says, "narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it." The entrance to the road of eternal life is described as narrow. The Greek word is *stenos* which comes from the root word *sten* which indicates that the entrance to this road is very restrictive. And it is right here, at this narrow turn off, the journey of the Church age believer begins. If one does not enter here, one cannot enter.

I want to tell you what makes this gate narrow. First, it is only through Jesus Christ that this road may be entered. Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me." Contrast this road with the broad road of destruction. On the broad road to destruction you would see a sign like this: RELIGIONS, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, New Age, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Catholics, Buddhism and the list goes on and on. This broad road welcomes all religions beliefs and faiths except true Christianity. It is narrow because there is only one way. If you preach this message in many places even some so called evangelical churches you will never be invited back. I have given this message in places and even my Christian friends frowned.

(Ill. of Indian. All roads lead to heaven.)

The second thing that makes this gate narrow is that one must pass through by way of death, the cross. If you want to continue in sin and in the pleasures of this world, this gate is barred. Here you will experience a crucifixion first and then you may journey on. When most people see that this road is begun by death they continue on the wide and easy road, sometimes deceived into thinking they have found an easier narrow road.

Christian in Pilgrim's Progress was traveling with a great burden on his back. At one point Christian was talking to one called Goodwill. Bunyan writes, "Then I saw in my dream, that Christian asked him further if he could not help him off with his burden that was upon his back, for as yet he had not got rid thereof, nor could he by any means get it off without help" (29-30). But Christian had to carry his burden until he got to the cross. Let me describe that part of the journey from Bunyan's book, "Now, I saw in my dream that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side with a wall that was called Salvation. Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more" (39). Bunyan then describes how "glad and lightsome and merry of heart" Pilgrim was when his burdens rolled away.

Then Pilgrim began to sing:

"Thus far did I come laden with my sin,
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in,
Till I came hither: what a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be
The Man that was there put to shame for Me!"

CONCL: I ask you at the outset of these messages, have you embarked yet on the Journey of the Church Age Believer? Do you realize what the cross cost God Almighty?

I want to tell you a little story that will help you grasp the magnitude of the price God paid for your redemption. It is a true story. It happened back in the roaring 20's in the state of Oklahoma to a young man, 22 years old by name of John Griffith. He had one young son. It was an exciting time to live. John always wanted to be a travelor. He could see himself traveling all over the world. He dreamed of this. Then in 1929 the stock market crashed. The whole country was plunged into a deep depression and Oklahoma was no exception. At that time John's dreams died. Things became very difficult in the Griffith home. Rather broken heartedly the Griffith family packed their things and along with their only son Greg, they made their way into Missouri. Finally they came to the banks of the Mississippi River and there John finally found a job. The job he got was operating one of those immense railroad bridges that span the mighty Mississippi River. Day after day John would be in the control room. When the freighters and other large ships came John would operate the levers and the railroad would raise up into the sky and the ships could travel

underneath the bridge. When time came for the train the bridge would be lowered and the trains would rumble accross this mighty river. This was his job day by day.

He often wondered where the ships might be traveling but his dreams of traveling were over. Then in 1937 a new dream began to formulate. He thought of his son. Then he thought it would be nice to have a business and it could be called John Griffith and son. One day he and his son might be able to work side by side. Thus a new dream was born in John's heart. So one day he decided to take his son to work with him at the bridge. Together they had breakfast and made their lunch. Then arm in arm they headed off to the bridge. There in the control room of that gigantic bridge Greg watched wide eyed as his father raised and lowered this vast bridge. For eight year old Greg, his father was the most amazing man in the world. He marveled at what he saw.

Time passed quickly and soon the noon whistle blew. John raised the bridge because a number of ships were scheduled to pass during the noon hour. So John and his son Greg made their way down the ladder onto a kind of cat walk and then out to an obervation deck some fifty feet over the Mississippi. And there they sat down to enjoy their lunch. As they ate John told his son story after story of some of the exotic places of the world. Greg was hanging on every word his father told him. Then suddenly John was shocked back into reality when he heard a shrill railroad whistle. He quickly looked at his watch and it was 1:07 already. In just a couple minutes the Memphis Express would be at the bridge and the bridge was up. He didn't want to alarm his son, and so he tried to suppress the panic he himself was feeling, and so he said to his son, "Greg I have to go right up and do something but I'll come back as soon as I'm done to get you. You sit right here and don't move. OK?" And then he quickly jumped up and actually fled down the catwalk and scrambled up the ladder and into the control tower. And once he was in the control tower he quickly glanced up the river as he was trained to do to see if any ships were coming. And then as he was also trained to do he looked right straight down to see that there was nothing underneath the bridge.

As his eyes took in the scene underneath the bridge he saw something so horrifying that it froze his heart in his chest. There lying in the huge gearbox amongst the huge cogs of the gears was his son Greg. It seems Greg had tried

to follow his father up the catwalk, had slipped and fallen into the gearbox. He could see that he was wedged between a few of the cogs. He could also see that he was conscious yet but his leg was bleeding profusely and he seemed to be cut quite badly. Then an even more horrifying thought struck him. If he lowers the bridge he will kill his son. Panic hit then. Thinking over his options he was frustrated because there were no good answers. He would think of his son there in those gears and then it would go back to the Memphis Express with about 400 passengers. If he lowered the bridge his son would be squashed between those huge gears. If he left the bridge up those 400 passengers would plunge into the Mississippi. He thought about his wife. What could he tell her. Perspiration was pouring off his face. But the seconds were precious. Time was of essence.

Knowing he had only one choice John covered his face with one arm and shoved down on the lever with the other. The sound of the moving gears and heavy mechanism drowned out the cries of his son. And his son was gone. Then just as the bridge locked into position the Memphis Express came roaring out of the trees and rumbled across the bridge. John lifted his tear stained face. He looked into the train and saw people in the dining car having tea. The conductor was looking at his watch. A boy was pushing his spoon into a pile of icecream. It seemed everyone on the train was involved in was either involved in idle conversation or careless laughter. But no one seemed to look his way. No one even gave an idle glance at the giant gear box that contained the remains of his son Greg. And in anguish John pounded on the window in that control house. And he cried out, "What's the matter with you people. Don't you care. Don't you understand what I have just done? What's wrong with you people that you don't even care! No one answered. No one heard. No one even looked. It seemed no one did care.

Then as suddenly as it had appeared out of the trees the train disappeared from view across the river.

I want to invite you today with the final words of the Word of God, " And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely (Rev. 22:17).