

John Bunyan

Various Scriptures

Biblical instruction from the life and writings of the man who gave us *The Pilgrim's Progress*

LTS: Eph. 6:10-20

When the pilgrims arrived in the New World in 1620, they were fleeing the reign of a tyrannical English monarchy that persecuted any Christian sect that refused to conform to the religious dictates of the church of England. Throughout the late 15 and early 1600's there were actually two groups of Christians that the Crown had its eye on. The first were called Dissenters or Separatists who so strongly disagreed with the doctrine and practice of the church of England, they were willing to separate themselves at great personal cost from that apostate church. By definition, therefore, the Pilgrims who stepped off the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock were Dissenters and Separatists.

The other people who were crossways with the crown were called the Puritans. The Puritans disagreed with the state-run church just as strongly as the separatist but were not interested in separating from the church of England or moving to the New World. Rather, they were resolved to purify the church from within through the process of biblical reform. Hence, The Westminster Divines (men such as John Owen, Thomas Watson, Richard Baster, Jeremiah Burroughs, etc.) were all Puritans. It was they who created the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter catechisms. Unfortunately for both for these groups, King James (of KJV fame) and later, his successor Charles 1st. served respectively as the legal heads of the Church of England and were willing to resort to persecution and even execution in order to keep England unified around the official church. For that reason, in 1662, two thousand Puritan Pastors were forced out of their churches.

This morning I want to talk with you about the Christian life and the path of discipleship as expressed in the bible and as illustrated helpfully and practically in a book written by John Bunyan called *The Pilgrims Progress*. But I suspect we will NOT be able to understand the life of John Bunyan or his story without grasping something of the historical theater in which it all took place. So, let me begin by offering a short biography of the life of John Bunyan, and then we will explore his narrative of the normal Christian life.

I. Biography:

1. John Bunyan was born in the village of Elstow, England near Bedford, to Thomas and Margaret Bunyan. As practicing Anglicans, they had baby, John, Baptized as an infant in the Anglican Church on Nov. 30, 1628 (Note, this is only 8 years after the Pilgrims anchored off the coast of New England).

2. In his early years his poor parents managed to provide minimal education that taught him to read and write but otherwise he was uneducated. Attending church with his parents John learned something of what the bible taught on heaven and hell, and he certainly didn't want to end up in hell, but by his own admission, he loved his sin.

3. His suffering began in earnest when he was 16 years old. John's mother died unexpectedly. A few weeks later his sister also died. To make matters worse, his father remarried a month after that! John's life was turned up-side-down to say the least. He suddenly found himself at home with a step mother and an irreligious father. Not long after, John either joined or was drafted into the Parliamentary army embroiled in a civil war against King Charles 1st. Nothing is known about his time in the military except that on one occasion as a soldier he was sent with others to launch an attack on the enemy, but as he was preparing to go another soldier volunteered to go in his place on that mission. During the battle that young man took a musket ball to the head and died. This was John's first real brush with death.

4. At age 21 he married a young woman about whom we know almost nothing, not even her name! We do know, however, that she was a godly young lady whose father was a devout Puritan. Her life had a profound impact on Bunyan. As one biographer put it, "she brought him a tender love, [and it] awakened his thirst for higher joys."¹ Together they had four children, the first of whom, Mary, was born blind. O how he loved this child.

5. The happy couple was so poor, he says, that they did not have "so much household stuff as a dish or spoon between them both!"² What they did have, however, were two books given by her father. The first was Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety*, and the second - Arthur Dent's *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*. These they would often read together. But by his own admission, the gospel truths contained in the volumes never made it to his heart. What they did accomplish, however, was to awaken within him a desire to be religious. So, he became, without knowing it, a religious pretender, or what I often call a religious unbeliever.

¹ David Calhoun, *Grace Abounding*, (Scotland, Focus Publishing, 2005), 15

² *Ibid.*, 15

6. In his new religious fervor Bunyan began reading the Bible and attending church twice every Sunday. He developed the ability to be quite conversant in religious things. His neighbors were astonished at his moral transformation, but it wasn't gospel transformation. On the outside he was impressive. On the inside, he was dead.

7. Bunyan was a Tinker by trade; that is, a mender of pots. A metal worker. Or we might call him a handyman. Such work required some travel to nearby towns, and one day as he was looking for work in Bedford, he came across three or four poor women sitting in the sun in a doorway. He heard them talking about religious things and decided to join in since he considered himself "a brisk talker... in matters of religion."³ He soon realized, however, that they were far above him in spiritual matters; for, he says, "their talk was about a new birth, the word of God on their hearts. They spoke as if joy did make them speak." He knew that he did not have the peace and joy of these women who could sit happily in the sunshine of God's love and favor.⁴

8. This had a profound effect on Bunyan's life. In fact, it would seem that the Spirit of God had caused him to be born again through his frequent conversation with these women and their pastor, John Gifford. But it wasn't long before doubts set in. Years later he would write a book called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* wherein he details the years of frequent spiritual warfare for the assurance of his salvation and how God finally delivered him and set him free by the power of sovereign grace.

A. Bunyan was greatly helped in this years-long battle with lack of assurance by reading Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. He said he came to prefer, after the Bible, Luther's book on Galatians "before all the books I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience."⁵

B. Through Luther Bunyan learned that God's grace was greater than every, any, and all sin without exception. He wrote:

Those who are 'effectually in Christ,' can never lose him nor can they be lost by him. There are, of course, many stumblings and fallings in the Christian life, but 'so many times as the soul backslides, so many times God brings him [back] again.' He says, 'The law of grace has provided that the children shall not for

³ Ibid., 17

⁴ Ibid., 17

⁵ Calhoun, 21

their sin lose their inheritance in heaven forever. Nothing can make Christ 'let go his hold that he hath of you of heaven.'⁶

C. In the middle of the fierce battle for his assurance of salvation he found that old tattered copy of Luther's commentary on Galatians, and upon reading it he said,

I saw moreover, that it was NOT my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet by bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness [is] Jesus Christ himself, 'the same yesterday, today, and forever' (Heb. 13:8). Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed, I was loosed from my afflictions and irons, my temptations also fled away... Now I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God... I lived, for some time, very sweetly at peace with God through Christ. I thought Christ! Christ! There was nothing but Christ that was before my eyes!"⁷

9. Though Bunyan was unsure of his own salvation, pastor Gifford believed he was a true child of God and encouraged him to join the church. John Gifford led a Separatist congregation, so public meetings took place under threat of arrest. It was, therefore, under cover of darkness in the middle of the night that John Bunyan was "led by Mr. Gifford through the waters of baptism – betokening a death unto sin, and resurrection unto Life Eternal."⁸

10. Eventually, Bunyan becomes a deacon. He moves his family to Bedford to be close to the church, and one day he is given opportunity to encourage the church body with a lesson from the Scriptures. O what a monumental event this would prove to be - not only for the Bedford church, but for England and the world! For it was discovered that John Bunyan, this uneducated Tinker, was gifted by God to PREACH!

11. For five years Bunyan had blessed freedom to preach. He preached "NOT only in Bedford but in the darkest places of the country."⁹ Harrison writes that His influence

⁶ Calhoun, 179

⁷ Joel R. Beeke & Paul M. Smalley, *John Bunyan and the Grace of Fearing God*, (Phillipsburg, P&R, 2016), 10

⁸ Frank Mott Harrison, *John Bunyan*, (Carlisle, Pa., Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 56
Ibid., 29

⁹ Calhoun, 24

was unbounded. People came to hear the Word by hundreds and from all parts.”¹⁰ It is recorded that “King Charles II once asked John Owen, the distinguished Puritan theologian and Oxford scholar, how such an educated man as he could sit and listen to a tinker. Owen replied, ‘I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker’s power of touching men’s hearts.’”¹¹

12. Because he was uneducated, Bunyan found himself under frequent public attack as to his credentials. He was thought unfit for the ministry of preaching. But John Burton, who wrote the preface to Bunyan’s first book, came to his defense declaring, “This man is not chosen out of an earthly but out of a heavenly university, the church of Christ... He has through grace taken these three heavenly degrees; namely, Union With Christ, The Anointing of the Spirit, and the Experience of the temptation of Satan, which do more fit a man for that mighty work of preaching the Gospel than all university learning and degrees can be had.”¹²

13. At the height of his preaching ministry (1658), however, his Lord calls him to suffer dearly again. Without explanation his biographers note that his dear wife died leaving him with four children under 10 to care for, one of whom (Mary) is blind. Additionally, he knows that his popularity has caught the attention of the authorities. He has been preaching w/o a license and presiding over illegal church meetings. He knows it is just a matter of time before he is arrested. As Harrison describes the scene, “At any moment he may have to leave all to suffer for conscience’ sake. His little ones – and poor blind Mary now in her teens – need closer care than the best of fathers, unaided, can give. He has besought his God to guide him, and the answer is clear – Marry¹³

14. He is convinced there is only one woman to whom he can entrust the care of His children - saintly Elizabeth. He speaks with her about it. She prays for guidance and consents to become his wife and to mother his 4 children. In 1659 the two are married. He is 32 and she is 18.¹⁴

15. Soon after, a warrant for his arrest is signed. He is invited to preach at a farm house in another town. Bunyan accepts the invitation knowing full well the danger of

¹⁰ Harrison, 73

¹¹ Calhoun, 33-34

¹² Ibid., 168

¹³ Harrison, 83

¹⁴ Calhoun, 26

doing so. He arrives at the designated place and is immediately arrested and taken to the magistrate. There he is offered the choice: Promise to stop preaching and go home to your family or continue preaching and spend years in jail. His answer: “I shall not [stop] speaking the Word of God; even to counsel, to exhort, and to teach the people among whom I come.”¹⁵ Thus begins for John Bunyan a twelve-year imprisonment in the Bedford Jail.

16. One of the things that makes Bunyan’s life so remarkable is that his prison experience did not diminish his ministry – it just changed his platform and approach. As in Paul’s letter to the Philippians he was able to say (Phil. 1:12) “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...” Calhoun observes that “Bunyan’s life, had one goal – to present as clearly as possible the Christians Gospel. When he could, Bunyan preached it; when he could not preach it, he wrote it. Like the apostle Paul, he could say, ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!’”¹⁶

17. So he continued preaching. On the Lord’s day his congregation would come to the jail and he would expound the Scriptures to them (presumably, through the window of his cell). Now this is a different kind of prison ministry. Normally, prison ministry happens when a pastor goes into the jail to preach. In Bunyan’s case, however, people came to the jail to hear good preaching! Sometimes there were as many as 200 people gathered to hear him proclaim the excellencies of Christ and His gospel!

18. We need to be careful here, however, not to romanticize Bunyan’s jail experience. This was indeed a circumstance of great suffering for he and his family. In his book, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he confesses,

Notwithstanding, all the helps [which God provided] I found myself a man, and compassed with infirmities; the parting with my wife and poor children has oft been to me in this place as the pulling the flesh from my bones, and that no only because I am somewhat too fond of those great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries, and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides; O the thoughts of

¹⁵ Harrison, 91

¹⁶ Calhoun, 167

the hardship I thought my blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces.¹⁷

19. Nevertheless, Bunyan was resolved that Christians “must obey God rather than men” (Acts. 5:29) whatever the cost. Christians must accept suffering with patience, humility, and cheerfulness, for it is a badge of the saint and evidence of one’s faithfulness.”¹⁸

20. So he continued preaching while in jail. But it may be argued, that the most fruitful means by which he ministered to his flock and to all of England was NOT through his preaching, but through his writing.

II. The Pilgrims Progress

1. Most of us are familiar with two or three of his famous works, but few realize that John Bunyan actually wrote nearly sixty books over the course of his ministry both in jail and out.

2. The best known of his books, of course, is *The Pilgrim’s Progress* which Bunyan wrote from his jail cell. Next to the Bible it has been the world’s best selling book... translated into 200+ languages. It was immediately successful, with three editions in 1678, the first year it was published.¹⁹ Bunyan’s allegory of the Christian life is so full of Scripture and theology that it has been called “The Westminster Confession of faith with people in it.”²⁰ In the nineteenth century, it was said that virtually every English home possessed two books: the authorized Version of the Bible (KJV) and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.²¹ My friends, there is a reason for that. To read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is to be instructed, counseled, warned and comforted in the long and difficult journey called the Christian life.

3. I want to use the remainder of our time this morning reintroducing you to the rich theology and practical counsel of Scripture woven into this marvelous little book.

¹⁷ John Bunyan, *Grace Abound to the Chief of Sinners*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1991), 141-142

¹⁸ Calhoun, 35

¹⁹ John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2001), 60

²⁰ Calhoun, 170

²¹ Beeke & Smalley, vii

4. Listen to how the story begins. Bunyan writes:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I came to a place where there was a den. Inside, I lay down to sleep, and as I slept, I had a dream. In my dream I looked up and saw a man clothed in rags standing in a certain place with his face turned away from his home. He carried a Book in his hand and a great burden on his back. As I watched, I saw him open the book and begin to read. And as he read, he wept and trembled. Then, not being able to contain himself any longer, he cried out in anguish, "What shall I do?"

5. As this story is an allegory, most everything in it is designed to carry biblical truth and meaning. Bunyan begins his story with a biblical anthropology. He shows us in narrative form what the bible teaches about the nature and predicament of all people. His main character is a man clothed in rags (Isa. 64:6 "All our righteousness is as filthy rags"). The man carries a book in his hand (the Bible) and has a great burden on his back (Psa. 38:4 "My iniquities have gone over my head like a heavy burden"). Then the man cries out, "What shall I do?" (Acts 16:30, "What must I do to be saved?").

6. As you read you can't help but be impressed with Bunyan's comprehensive grasp of the Scriptures. Here we are only one paragraph into the story and he has already referenced five Scriptures. Thankfully, he includes ALL of the references for these texts in the margin of the pages throughout the story.

A. Bunyan kept himself immersed in the Scriptures. One of his biographers said, "He was never out of the Bible, either by reading or meditation."²² Bunyan maintained that he drew his theology directly from the Bible. In his writings he carefully built up and supported his arguments on the basis of biblical texts. He quoted the older Geneva Bible as well as the Authorized (King James) Version of 1611. Late in life Bunyan writes: My Bible and concordance are my only library in my writings.²³

B. Charles Spurgeon, who read *The Pilgrim's Progress* every year, put it like this:

He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere; and

²² Harrison, 29

²³ Calhoun, 169

you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God.²⁴

7. Already we see what Bunyan doing in the story, right? The first step of life with God is to become aware of your sin and the heavy burden of guilt that it inescapably causes. We like to see ourselves us clean and whole. We fancy ourselves righteous and acceptable to God. But God, like a good physician, is kind enough to expose our true sickness so that we can apply the true cure. Our true sickness is sin. We have no righteousness of our own, we are separated from God, and there is nothing we can do to remedy the problem.

8. As Pilgrim walks and cries out in despair with the book in his hand, another man approaches whose name is Evangelist. Evangelist (who represents a faithful pastor) gives the man a parchment scroll that reads, “Flee from the wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7). But the man doesn’t know where to go. So, Evangelist points to a place that is almost out of sight where there is a “wicket gate.” “Make your way to the wicket gate,” he says. “When you knock on it you will be told what to do.”²⁵

9. Turn with me to Matt. 7:13.

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

10. What does that have to do with a “Wicket gate”? We have to understand that Bunyan is an Englishman using a very English analogy. Here in America we aren’t as familiar with the term he uses here. I always thought he meant a “wicker” gate, or a gate made of braided wicker. But I looked it up last week and discovered that I wasn’t even close.

11. Imagine a large, fortified English estate. It has an entrance built into the outer wall that presents a huge gate that can be variously opened or closed to let in horse-drawn carriages and the like. But that is not the only entrance you will find there. A little to the side you will see another, much smaller, entrance that is NO larger than a small door able to admit one person at a time. In England, the large entrance is called the main gate, and the small entrance to the side is called a Wicket Gate.

²⁴ John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2001),77

²⁵ Cheryl V. Ford, *The Pilgrims Progress*, (Carol Stream, Il., Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 5

12. Bunyan's original audience would have immediately caught the meaning. It painted the words of Jesus in a picture they would have intuitively understood. And here is the meaning: If you want your burden of sin removed, ignore the path that the crowds and masses of religious people stroll through. It is a easy way, but it is the wrong way. Rather, enter through the narrow gate (the Wicket gate) because it alone leads to life and few there are who find it.

- A. My friends, this command and warning of our Lord is just as relevant and necessary today as it was in Bunyan's day – as it was in Jesus' day.
- B. The world thinks the path to God is easy. They say it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe in something. In the end we will all go to heaven and enjoy the sweet presence of a tolerant, non-judgmental God. But that's that what God says.
- C. I want to say especially to you young people that the social pressure on you to follow the masses through their Main Gate will often feel like more than you can resist. You will be laughed at and scorned and called a bigot and intolerant. But this is how it has always been. And the only way to eternal life is STILL the narrow way.

13. In fact, this is the dynamic we discover in Bunyan's story. A man named Obstinate comes along immediately and begins to berate Pilgrim as a fool demanding that he return home. But Pilgrim resists and presses forward toward the Wicket gate.

14. As he travels, he meets a man named Mr. Worldly Wiseman who also seeks to discourage Pilgrim on his journey. He tells him that there is a shorter and easier way to heaven (the celestial city) and that if he would simply take a side path that leads to the top of Mt. Sinai he will find the city of Morality where he can meet a man who will show him a shortcut that is easier and a lot less dangerous way to heaven The name of that man is Mr. Legality. He was offering the same path to heaven as the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus day.

15. Paul explains this in Rom. 3:20-23 "For by works of the law NO human being will be justified... But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

16. Eventually, Pilgrim makes it to the Wicket gate and discovers a sign posted over it that reads, "Knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

- A. Bunyan was a Puritan and a Calvinist which meant he NOT only believed in God's sovereignty over salvation, but also in the free offer of salvation. We see both here.
- B. On the one hand, Pilgrim knocks on the gate in response to the free offer. But

then, when Goodwill (who represents Christ) appears, he opens the gate for pilgrim, grabs him and pulls him through.

17. Pilgrim comes through the gate and not long afterward to a hill. He is running upward now “where their stood a cross on a hill. A little way down from there was an open Grave.” Then Bunyan writes, “And I saw in my dream that just as Christian approached the Cross, his burden came loose from his shoulders, fell from his back, and began to roll downward until it tumbled into the open grave to be seen no more.”²⁶

18. This is where Pilgrim’s journey begins in earnest. Immediately he is stripped of his tattered clothing and dressed in bright, new garments”²⁷ (the righteousness of Christ). A mark is placed on his forehead, and he is handed a scroll which he was to study until he arrived at the Celestial City.

19. This is merely the beginning of the story. From here Pilgrim (who is now called Christian) is taught the value of the local church and the Lord’s supper. He engages in a frightening spiritual battle against Apollyon, the enemy of our souls (Eph. 6). He learns the discipline of meditating on the God’s promises. He witnesses the danger of loving money and the approval of men. He meets a Christian who was almost destroyed by lust and learns how it was defeated. He watches helplessly as his dear friend is martyred. He suffers the consequences of spiritual laziness. He falls into hopeless depression and despair only to discover that all along he possessed the key that would enable his escape. In the end he comes to the river of death and we are shown how different people respond to dying and how all of God’s people are gloriously delivered from death itself.

20. Moms and dads, do you need help training your children (young and old) what it looks like live the Christian life in a manner that please the Lord? Then I commend to you the story of Pilgrims Progress, and the example of its author, John Bunyan.

Gospel Conclusion:

²⁶ Ford, 37

²⁷ Ibid, 38