

**Pilgrim's Progress:
City of Destruction
(The Burden of Sin)**

Acts 16:30-31

By Dr. Derek Thomas

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Now turn with me, if you would, to The Acts of the Apostles, and to chapter sixteen. Some very familiar words of the Philippian jailer, as he cries out from his prison cell, "What must I do to be saved?" We're going to pick up the reading at verse 28 of Acts 16. Before we read the passage together, let's ask for God's blessing. Let's pray.

Our Father, again as we bow now in Your presence, we come acknowledging that without You we can do nothing. Come, Holy Spirit, and cause a light to shine on these words which You caused to be written for our benefit, for our instruction, that we might be the men and women of God that You desire us so to be. Hear us, O Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Verse 28 of Acts 16:

"But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!' And he called for lights and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.'"

Amen. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, I suppose I need to make something by way of an apology, or an *apologia*, perhaps would be better, for this series on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. I have...oh, 15 or 20, or maybe more...different editions and copies (probably more!) of *Pilgrim's Progress*, but I brought two with me this evening. One is very dear to me, and I'll tell you why later in the series. But this I've had since 1973, and I'll tell you why this is very dear to me later.

But if you haven't got one, why not? But if you haven't got one, I think this is the one I would recommend. It's the Oxford University Press edition, the *Oxford Worlds Classics*. But for Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* I like this one especially,

because it has a wonderful set of notes, both in the margins and in the back, explaining those sometimes difficult seventeenth century little words that Bunyan uses. And I'm not into modernizations in any shape or form about anything, and certainly not about Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

I would encourage you, over these balmy, warm, hot summer evenings, to read along with Bunyan. Some of you have been reading Bunyan since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, and others of you, I've heard in recent days, have never read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. So let me urge you to read one of the greatest Christian classics of all time, and to read through as we go along in this series. The series will take us through to the end of September...so, over the next three and a half or four months or so.

Now, the reason why I need to make an apology is because for some of you it seems a little odd that we would be taking as a theme a book other than the Bible. I love it when Christians get concerned about that. That's a really good sign, when you are concerned that the Bible isn't central! Well, let me disabuse you of any fears. The Bible will indeed be central. I want to take some of the teachings and the doctrines, some of the issues that Bunyan raises in the course of this famous allegory, and point you to the Scriptures from whence Bunyan draws those truths. You'll all remember the very famous remark of Charles Haddon Spurgeon about Bunyan, and a quick mathematical calculation of the printed sermons (...now, there are many thousands of printed sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon...) revealed in at least a quarter of them Spurgeon referred to Bunyan. And he said about Bunyan that if you pricked him anywhere, his blood would be bibline—that is to say, Bible text would flow out of his veins.

These, then, will be topical sermons; not what we normally do here at First Presbyterian Church, that is, preach our way through books of the Bible, going from verse to verse from the first one until the very last one of that book—that so-called *lecto continua* method of preaching. These are the summer months, and Ligon and I agree that we can do things just a little bit differently over the summer.

Why Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*? Well, because next to the Bible, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the best-selling Christian book of all time. It has never been out of print since the first part of it (which is what we'll be looking at—there are two parts, but we'll just be looking at the first part)...it has never been out of print since its publication in 1678. In an age of fantasy, when the genre of fantasy has become something of a cult, and especially in Christian circles: *Lord of the Rings*; *Narnia Chronicles* about to emerge. If you've not read the book, then you'll see the movie...in an age when fantasy literature has received something of a cultic status, then Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, I put it to you, stands supreme.

Let me cite J.I. Packer in a conclusion to an analysis of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

Progress. He says,

When I ask my classes of young and youngish evangelicals, as I often do, who has read *Pilgrim's Progress*, not a quarter of the hands go up. Yet our rapport with fantasy writing, plus our lack of grip on the searching, humbling, edifying truths about spiritual life that the Puritans understood so well, surely mean that the time is right for us to dust off *Pilgrim's Progress* and start reading it again. Certainly it would be great gain for modern Christians if Bunyan's masterpiece came back into its own in our day.

I. Introduction.

Now this book, of course, is an allegory, the illustrative representation of one thing by another; and in Bunyan's case, he will employ parables and metaphors, and fancies (by which you and I would read 'fantasies'), and similitudes in *Pilgrim's Progress* of every sort, and he does this by seeing the Christian life as a journey, a road trip, to the Celestial City, to heaven.

Then he pictures that road as straight and narrow, and strewn with all kinds of dangers and temptations and pitfalls, and then by introducing to us characters with delightful names, illustrative as they are of events and issues and realities and circumstances that all of us as Christians are familiar with—folk like Worldly Wiseman, and Lord Hategood, and Mr. Legality, and Mr. Liveloose, and Giant Despair—as well as places, including the House of Interpreter, and Doubting Castle, and the Valley of Humiliation, Delectable Mountains, and By-Path Meadow.

We'll tell the background to Bunyan's life, and the background, therefore, to *Pilgrim's Progress* as we go along. It is the seventeenth century. England is in a state of civil war in the mid-forties of the seventeenth century. Political and social and religious turmoil is all around, and Bunyan will spend upwards of twelve years in prison for his faith, even though he was initially only sentenced to a period of six months. All that and more we'll reflect on as we make our journey on this road trip, but it's time to begin.

And it begins like this:

"As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted in a certain place where was a den [Bunyan, you remember, is in prison], and laid me down in that place to sleep. And as I slept, I dreamed a dream. 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 on his back."

II. A man with a burden.

The book, first of all, is the very first thing that Bunyan notes for us. This man is carrying a book. And he lives in the City of Destruction [something that we won't learn, in fact, until several pages into the narrative to the allegory], and he is crying out. First of all, he's crying out those words that were cried out on the Day of Pentecost after Peter had preached his famous Pentecost sermon: "What shall we do?" And then, more personal words, words that we read together from Acts 16, the words of the Philippian jailer when he thinks that Paul and Silas have bolted the prison cell. His life is going to be forfeited and done for, and he cries out, "What shall I do to be saved?"

Bunyan gives us a little description of what has happened. What has happened to bring this man into this melancholy state of mind?

"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? What shall I do?"

This is Bunyan's way of describing the Bible. The book, of course, is the Bible, the Scriptures. It's not going to be the only reference to the Bible in the course of Pilgrim's *Progress*. Later on we'll see a scroll, or a parchment, that will be given to him by Evangelist. It is the Bible. Later he will see an inscription that is hanging over the Wicket Gate. We'll see that next week. And on that inscription reads the words, "Knock and it shall be opened up to you." And later, a key...a key that will open up the castle of Giant Despair, Doubting Castle...which is the key, the key of the Scriptures.

What has this book done? It has awoken in this man a sense of his need. It hasn't yet showed to him the solution to his problem, but it has shown him that his present condition is one of danger, it's one of doom, it's one which causes him to cry out, "What shall I do to be saved?"

Bunyan has this man speaking to his wife and to his children:

"I am for certain informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven, in which fearful overthrow both myself with thee, my wife, and you, my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin. Except, the which yet I see not, some way of escape can be found whereby we may be delivered."

The Bible has convicted him of his danger. He has nothing to commend himself. Bunyan portrays him as being clothed in rags. He's alluding, of course, to the prophecy of Isaiah, "All of our righteousness is as filthy rags." He has nothing by which to commend himself before God. There's little doubt that Bunyan may well be describing his own experience at this point.

Bunyan was born in 1628. He was born to Thomas and Margaret Bunyan in a little village called Elstow, which was then about a mile outside of Bedford. And John Bunyan was born in very lowly, humble, poor circumstances. His father was a tinker, or a brazier, someone who worked at the forge, and at his cottage, or perhaps went peripatetically from farm to farm in his trade.

By 16, Bunyan was out of school. He confessed not to have learnt a great deal in school. Every attempt to ascertain how much Bunyan had learnt, of course, has failed, and sometimes when you read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* there is the touch of a master about it. He's 16 years of age. In 1644, England is in a state of civil war. Parliament and the king are at loggerheads. Parliament has called *The Westminster Assembly* to session in London; the attempt to reform worship practice that had stalled in the 1630's. Parliament had already abolished the compulsory use of *The Prayer Book*, and it had also abolished *The Book of Sports*, something James II had introduced in 1618. Wrestling, shooting, bowling, dancing, masks, weights, and games of all kinds were prohibited on the Lord's Day.

That year in June of 1644, John Bunyan's mother died, to be followed a few weeks later, in July, by the death of his sister; and followed a few weeks later, in August, by the fact that his father quickly remarried. John Bunyan left home and joined the army. He joined the Parliamentary forces. He probably came into contact with John Owen; he probably came into contact with Oliver Cromwell. He was at the famous Battle of Naseby in 1645, the decisive battle from which the royalist cause would never recover. He was disbanded in 1646. He would have been 17 or perhaps 18 years of age. And from that time until he was 21, when he got married, he would later describe that three, three-and-a-half year period of his life as "stained with crimson sins."

Now he wasn't a drunkard, and later he would passionately deny that he had ever been sexually promiscuous. But, like John Newton, Bunyan would say, "I had few equals for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God. Heaven and hell were both out of sight and out of mind, and as far as saving and damning, they were least in my thoughts."

Then, in 1649, at the age of 21, he married. He married a young lady whose name we don't even know. She would live for ten years. Three children would be born. One, a girl called Mary, perhaps after her mother...maybe the mother was called Mary... but she was blind. And John Bunyan was utterly devoted to her. It was one of the sorest trials that he had during his time in prison. Bunyan would later remarry after the death of his first wife.

His first wife was poor, as poor as a church mouse, and brought with her only two books: Arthur Dent's *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, and Bishop Bailey's long, lengthy discourses on *The Practice of Piety*. So, during those first few years of marriage the only books in the house were those two and the King James

Version of the Bible, which had been published, as you know, in 1611. As he read the Bible, and as he read those books that spoke and drove him to the Bible, he realized that the Bible spoke about something very earnest and very grave.

The second thing is “the burden.” We see “the book” — a book that this man has been reading. He is called...later in the story, of course, he will be identified as Christian...he's Graceless at this point in time. Later in the story he will allude to himself during this period as being called Graceless. And during this time, he's reading the Bible. And what has this Bible done? It's given to him a burden.

Bunyan started attending church with his wife, but he confessed that he forgot the sermon as soon as he'd eaten Sunday lunch! He would say, “Conversion to God is not so easy and so smooth a thing as some men would believe that it is.”

A series of struggles would ensue, one of which would bring him into a serious state of mind. It was a game which Bunyan was fond of playing on the Lord's Day. Remember, all kinds of games were prohibited on the Lord's Day in the 1640's. The game was called Tip-Cat. It consisted of a wooden block about three or four inches long, tapered at the end, and then a stick three feet or so long, and with that stick you would bang one end of that piece of wood so as to propel the thing into the air, and then swing at it (baseball!). It was an early form, I'm told, with some degree of assurance, that this game was introduced by certain colonists into New England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. It may well be the precursor to baseball.

Well, Bunyan is playing Tip-Cat. He's not only playing Tip-Cat on the Lord's Day, but he's playing Tip-Cat outside the church on the Lord's Day; and suddenly the thought comes to him, “Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or wilt thou have thy sins and go to hell?” Listen to Bunyan for a minute, because he was struck rigid by this thought:

“My state is surely miserable; miserable if I leave my sins, but miserable if I follow them. I cannot but be damned, and if I must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins as damned for few.”

But he couldn't get rid of his conscience that easily, and a month later he's standing outside a shop, a store, swearing and cursing to excess, and a loose and godless woman says to him in no uncertain terms that he should be ashamed of himself, that he is spoiling the youth of the whole town. And Bunyan falls silent and hangs his head in shame.

Well, we'll find out next week what happened to Bunyan, but Christian in this story is in similar circumstances. He's reading the Bible, and he's burdened. His face is away from his home; he's got his back turned to the City of Destruction in which he lives, and he's weighed down by this burden.

That's what the Bible will do for you. In 1971, in December of 1971—it was late November or early December—through a series of circumstances which I won't go into now, my best friend of all time...a lover of music, as I was...wrote to me and said, "I've become a Christian." And in the mail he sent to me a copy of John Stott's *Basic Christianity*. I had never read a Christian book in my life. I had been to church maybe four or five times in those eighteen years of my life. I had certainly never, ever read the Bible. I didn't possess a copy. I couldn't have told you if Genesis was in the Bible, let alone the first book of the Bible. I had never, ever studied it. I was studying mathematics at University, but I had never, ever read the Bible. I went out and bought the Bible. It was a child's Bible. It was the only Bible in the town...at least, in the store that I went into. It had pictures in it. And I began to read in the Gospel of John, because that's what John Stott told me to do. And as I read, I wasn't three, four, five chapters into the gospel, and I can identify with Christian: This colossal burden that I was a sinner, and that unless I could find a way of rescue, I was most certainly going to hell. Two weeks before that, I don't think I believed in a hell. I don't think I believed in a God. But now I believed there was a God, I believed there was a heaven, I believed there was a hell, and I was bound for it like this man, Christian.

He's got a burden, a colossal burden, on his shoulders. Here's a man who is under conviction of sin. Here's a man who's reading the Bible, and the Bible has shown him that he's a sinner, that he is undone, that he has nothing by which to offer himself in the sight of God. He knows that he's not right with God. He knows that he is lost and undone, and without hope in the world. He has this great burden upon his back, and he's weighed down with it. And this burden is more than sin; it's the consciousness of sin; it's the guilt of sin; it's the realization that this sin is going to cost him the fires of hell.

Bunyan is telling us something, and he's telling us something very profound. He's telling us something by way to answer the question, "How can I become a Christian? How can I get right with God?" He's telling us something about evangelism. He's telling us something about the way the gospel actually works, and it's more than just verbally acknowledging certain responses to certain questions. There has to be a realization that we are sinners. There has to be what Bunyan is describing in this allegory as a conviction of our sinfulness and of our wretchedness.

You know, Bunyan was in this condition...Bunyan, the author, now...was in this condition of being under the weight and burden of sin without the assurance of salvation. He was in that condition for eighteen months. Now, there are some people who will say that that is quite wrong. There are evangelical people who will say so. Why didn't Bunyan have Evangelist say immediately to Christian, "What you need to do is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."? Bunyan would say, "The reason why Evangelist doesn't say that at this point is, he wasn't ready to hear that yet. He needs to understand something about what sin is and what sin

deserves before you too quickly apply the remedy of the gospel. Because if you apply the remedy of the gospel too quickly, you produce what the Puritans would have called “gospel hypocrites” — people who think that they are Christians, when in actual fact they are not.

III. What to do with the burden?

So what does this man do now? You've seen the book and you've seen the burden, and what this man does now is that he bolts. He bolts out of the city. He runs. Christian explains about the book and the burden, and he adds, “Sir, I perceive by my book in my hand that I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgment.” And listen to this: “...and I find that I am unwilling to do the first, nor able to do the latter.”

So what does Evangelist say? He points him in the direction of the Light. The Light is, of course, Jesus Christ. And he asks Christian, “Can you see the Light?” (and this is the telling thing): Christian says, “No, I can't.” He can't see the Light yet.

So because he can't see the Light, he's not ready to trust in Jesus Christ; so he points him instead to the Wicket Gate. (Now, for a long time I thought it was “wicked” gate. It's Wicket Gate, with a “t”.) It's the straight gate of Matthew 7 in the Sermon on the Mount: “Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to eternal life, and few there be that find it,” Jesus says.

“Run in the direction of the Wicket Gate, because when you get to the Wicket Gate, then you'll see the Light.” And that's what he does. He runs, and his wife and his children are calling after him, but he sticks his fingers in his ears and he runs! He runs! And he's crying out, “Flee from the wrath to come!” And he's crying out, “Eternal life! Eternal life!”

“So he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the plain.”

Well, what becomes of Christian? Well, you'll have to tune in next week! He will deviate off course, of course. It's a road trip! It's a cracking good story! And right at the very beginning Christian deviates from the direction in which he should have been going. We'll have a look at that next week. It's going to have some disastrous consequences.

Now, it may well be, dear friends, as we've just been introducing this series tonight...it may well be that you are asking that very same question: What must I do to be saved? It may be in the providence of God that you have been reading the Bible of late, and it's been convicting you of your sin and of your need; and you're not a Christian. You're not right with God. You have never been born again. You've never confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior. And you're saying to

yourself, "I don't have twelve weeks to find the answer." And you may not. And listen, my friend, you may not have twelve weeks, so let me urge you, if you're in that condition, come and speak to us. We would love to take you through this course of the gospel and to show you and point you to that light, which is Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, as we are reminded by John Bunyan this evening of the way in which the Bible convicts us of sin and of guilt and of judgment to come, we are also conscious of the way of salvation through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And we pray this summer that You would lead us and guide us, and direct us; warm our hearts; convict us of things that need to be convicted about; shape and mold us, we pray, that we might better know the gospel and better know Jesus Christ, and better know Your word. And hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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