

Pilgrim's Progress (3): The House of Interpretation

Hebrews 6:4-6

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

July 3, 2005

This evening we return once again after a gap of a couple of weeks to our study of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Before I begin, let me once again recommend to you an edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*. If you've never read *Pilgrim's Progress*...and some of you have told me that you read it a long time ago, when you were a child or teenager, and you've picked it up again...and if you can't find your copy, then this is the version that I like the best - The Oxford University Press edition - mainly because it has wonderful footnotes, and I'm a footnote person! And then hot off the press, I mean literally hot off the press, and I doubt that Doug even has it in the bookstore yet, is the Professor Calhoun, David Calhoun from Covenant Seminary, teaches Church History at the PCA Seminary in St. Louis, has written this overall perspective on all things John Bunyan called *Grace Abounding*. And I read this on the train in the last week or so, and it's a marvelous, marvelous introduction to anything you ever wanted to know about John Bunyan...it's in here. I thoroughly recommend that.

Now, before we read tonight's text, which is a very somber one because we come to a particularly somber passage, I want to say that next week, next Sunday evening, which is the last one in this sanctuary and as the Lord in His marvelous and inscrutable providence has it, we're on "The Cross" next Sunday evening. Isn't that appropriate for next Sunday evening? And I think we're going to sing an entire medley of your favorite hymns next Sunday evening and have the Lord's Supper together, so it should be a very special time. I'm just glad that this sermon isn't next Sunday evening, because before we get to the cross, Bunyan introduces something quite extraordinary, and I want you to help think through this evening what this has to teach us about the way we understand the Christian life, and the way Bunyan understood the Christian life; how *The Westminster Confession*, the confession of our church...and the confession to which Bunyan would have subscribed apart from (he was a Baptist, of course)...apart from the section on Baptism and the Church, he certainly would have subscribed to the equivalent Baptist confession of faith. And I want us to think through what it is that we understand by the nature of the Christian life, and

what Bunyan understood of the nature of the Christian life. And to do that, I want us to go to Hebrews, chapter six, and one of these passages in the New Testament that has caused some Christians a great deal of concern, as we shall see in a minute, verses 4-6. Before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You again from the very bottom of our hearts for the Scriptures, the inerrant word of God. We thank You, Lord, for all of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. We thank You for those passages that are perhaps our favorite passages, and also thank You for those passages which are not our favorite passages, because in these also You have something profoundly important to teach us and instruct us. Give us, then, hearts and minds that are teachable. Bend us to Your will and purpose, and bless now the reading of the word of God for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hebrews, chapter six, and verses 4 through 6:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.

Thus far, God's holy and inerrant word.

Now, last time we left Christian running from his home and the City of Destruction into the plain and in the direction of the Wicket Gate, towards which, you remember, Evangelist had pointed him. Remember that he's carrying an enormous burden on his back and a good book in his hands.

Remember he encountered in the plain two characters, Obstinate and Pliable. Obstinate didn't last long and quickly goes home; then Christian and Pliable go forward and they fall, you remember, into the Slough of Despond, and Pliable soon frees himself and returns. It is Help that comes to the aid of Christian to rescue him from this mire.

And then a Worldly Wiseman suggests that the burden that Christian is carrying is totally unnecessary, and bids him ascend this steep, fiery mountain called Morality, and to meet a certain Mr. Legality. It is Bunyan's way of describing the difference between the way of grace and the way of works. "By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." We'll return to that theme again and again.

Finally Christian encounters faithful Evangelist once more, who chastises him because he has strayed from the path and leads him once again in the direction of the Wicket Gate, and bids him go in that direction with haste.

On getting to the narrow gate, Christian knocks several times (representing Christian's earnestness rather than any reluctance on the part of the Gatekeeper), and then the door opens. There's a conversation between Christian and the Gatekeeper, Mr. Goodwill — a conversation which is worth recalling.

Christian describes himself as a poor burdened sinner: "I come from the City of Destruction, but I'm going to Mount Zion that I may be delivered from the wrath to come. I would, therefore, Sir, since I'm informed that by this gate is the way thither, know if you're willing to let me in." And Goodwill says, "I am willing with all my heart," said he, and with that he opened the gate. And Goodwill pulls him through the gate, lest Beelzebub, the captain of a nearby castle, wounds him with the many arrows that he's shooting in the direction of Christian.

Now, there's a wonderful children's edition of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which is in the bookstore, entitled, *Dangerous Journey*. One of you showed that to me this morning. I don't have it, but you must get hold of it. It's got wonderful pictures in it, and if you don't like reading so many words, then spy the children's edition—it'll be easier if you have children, you understand, to spy the children's edition and the wonderful pictures—but there's a marvelous, marvelous picture of Goodwill pulling Christian through this gate, Wicket Gate, and arrows shooting and landing in the door of the Wicket Gate.

Now, from this point forward, you understand Christian is now a believer. He's a saved man. There is a problem: it's an enormous problem, a problem which we'll resolve next week. It's the fact that Christian still has the burden. Even though he's a Christian, even though he's a believer, he does not have assurance, and that's an issue that we'll see resolved next week when we finally see Christian come to the cross and the sepulcher, and the burden rolling down that hill and disappearing into the tomb.

Now, Bunyan does something at this point that is intriguing, engaging, alarming, surprising. I think if the allegory was being written today by most contemporary evangelists, I doubt very much that this section would appear in the book, let alone at this point in the book. So as we look at this section — it's Interpreter's House, and especially one of the things Interpreter shows Christian — we need to be asking ourselves several things. This is a story, you understand, but it's a story with a point. Bunyan is trying to teach you some theology. He's trying to teach you what the Bible instructs us about the nature of the Christian life.

Well, Christian moves on. He comes to the house — it's an enormous house, in the children's edition, a wonderful, wonderful house - by the way, if you ever go to England on a tour, you should get the little book, the One Day Publications book on Bunyan. They will suggest to you the very house that was in Bunyan's mind. It's still there. It may well have been the house. It's the house of Bunyan's minister, the one who instructed him on so many things of the Bible and its

teachings.

He meets this character, Interpreter, and Interpreter shows him what Bunyan calls “many excellent things” - seven of them. He's taken on a tour around the house, and he's shown seven things.

First of all, Christian sees a picture of a very grave person, with his eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in his hands, the law of truth upon his lips, the world behind his back. He is pleading with men, and a crown of gold hangs over his head. What a marvelous description of Evangelist! This is the man that had pointed Christian in the first place towards the Wicket Gate, and eventually toward that place where his burden will be removed. It's Bunyan's way of suggesting the importance of a teacher, one who shows and teaches and proclaims the gospel; who preaches the biblical gospel, who shows the way to heaven.

We've been suggesting recently, and our minister has been at length suggesting the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, as it is currently under attack from so many quarters — even, alas, from within our own bounds. Why is that important? Because fundamentally and crucially, the way of the gospel, the way of justification, the way to heaven by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, apart from the works of the law, was something for Bunyan which was the central message of the gospel, and blessing attends those who preach and proclaim and evangelize with that message.

Secondly, he sees a man sweeping a room, but all he does is produce a lot of dust. And then a girl comes and sprinkles water in the room, and the dust settles. Again, it's Bunyan's way of allegorizing the way of works. If you try to live by the law as a means of obtaining salvation, all you do is produce dust; and the water of the gospel must come and put that dust back into its place.

Thirdly, he sees two little children, and their names are Reason and Patience, and they represent people of this world: one who wants everything now, and one who is prepared to wait for the good things that God intends to give. Bunyan, of course, is suggesting that one of the lessons we need to learn is not only the lesson of the gospel itself, which he has shown in those first two pictures, but the lesson that we need to be patient in our reading of providence, in our reading of God's ways with us. We need to be patient. God is preparing us for an eternal city - a city which has foundations, a city whose builder and maker is God.

Fourthly, he sees a fire in a fireplace that burns higher and hotter, despite the fact that someone is throwing water on this fire. And then, out of sight, he's taken round to the back of the fireplace and there he sees a man in Christ who is continually, with the oil of his grace, maintaining the work already begun in the heart. So no matter what Satan may try to do to put out the fire, God the Holy Spirit is constantly ensuring that that fire burns hotter and hotter. No matter how

difficult things may be, the Holy Spirit, God Himself in the outworking of His providence is ensuring in a way that you may not be able to see...ensuring that the work which He has begun He will complete until the day of Jesus Christ.

And then in the fifth place, he is shown something else. He sees a valiant man fighting his way through many armed men, and eventually entering into the door of Beautiful Palace. Bunyan is simply saying that the Christian life is a fight. In the words of one Scottish Presbyterian of a former century, "It is a sore fight all the way." It's what Paul teaches us again and again: we're to put on the whole armor of God, because the very nature of the Christian life is one of a fight against the world, and the flesh, and the devil.

And then, sixthly, he finds a man in an Iron Cage who tells him that once he was a pilgrim, a fair and flourishing professor (one who professes faith in Jesus Christ), but that he had so hardened in his heart that he cannot now repent. And Interpreter says to Christian, "Let this man's misery be remembered by thee and be an everlasting caution to thee." We'll come back to that in a minute.

And seventhly and finally, Christian sees a man rising out of bed and shaking and trembling, who has dreamed that the Day of Judgment has come and he was left behind.

Now imagine: You're meeting a young Christian, someone who has just put his faith in Jesus Christ. He's a fledgling believer in Jesus Christ. I wonder what things you would want to teach that person about - you know, the seven basic principles that you need to know about the nature of the Christian life. And here is Bunyan. It's typically seventeenth century, it's typically Puritan, but it's biblical. It is, I argue, what the Bible teaches us about the nature of the Christian life. And I want to look at that sixth vision in more detail.

This man says:

"I was once a fair and flourishing Professor [professor of faith in Jesus Christ], both in my own eyes and also in the eyes of others: I once was, as I thought, fair for the Celestial City, and had then even joy at the thoughts that I would get thither."

And Christian asks him, you know, what has happened. And the man says, "I am now a man of despair, and am shut up in it, as in this Iron Cage. I cannot get out; O Now I cannot." And Christian asks him how he came to be in this condition, and the man says:

"I left off to watch and be sober; I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts; I sinned against the Light of the Word, and the Goodness of God; I have grieved the Spirit, and he is gone; I tempted the Devil, and he is come to me; I have provoked God to Anger, and he has left me; I have so hardened my heart that I

cannot repent."

And there's more in the conversation that takes place between this man in the Iron Cage and Christian. It's based, I suggest, on this passage that we read together this evening in Hebrews 6. There's a similar passage, as you well recall, in Hebrews 10.

I came across...many years ago now, probably 25 years ago now...a statement in Dr. Lloyd-Jones' commentaries — a series of exposition and sermons on the Book of Romans, and it's in the section when he's dealing with Romans 8:28 to the end of Romans 8 — that section which encourages the perseverance of the saints.

And Lloyd-Jones says this:

I can say definitely after some 35 years of pastoral experience that there are no passages in the whole of Scripture which have more frequently troubled and caused them soul agony than the passages in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10. Large numbers of Christian people are held in bondage by Satan owing to a particular misunderstanding of these statements. I do not say that these are the two most difficult passages in the Bible; I do not regard them as such. But I do assent that they are passages the devil seems to use most frequently in order to distress and to trouble God's children.

Now let me say three or perhaps four things about this vision and about this particular passage in Hebrews 6.

I. What this *does not teach*.

First of all, what is this not teaching us? It is not teaching — neither Bunyan nor Hebrews 6 is teaching — that a true Christian can fall from grace and become a reprobate: that you can be saved today, genuinely saved today, in union and communion with Jesus Christ today and lost tomorrow. Bunyan is not teaching that, and Hebrews 6 is not teaching that.

The Bible, I think, is very clear about that: that those whom God regenerates, those whom God gives a new heart, those who are in union and communion with Jesus Christ shall persevere to the end and be certainly saved; that having "...begun a good work, He will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ"; that "Those whom God hath predestined, those He also calls; and those whom He calls, them He also justifies; those whom He justifies, them He also glorifies. What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" And you can recite, I'm sure, for yourself the rest of that passage in Romans 8.

So neither Bunyan nor Hebrews 6 is teaching us that a true, genuine child of God in union and communion with Jesus Christ, with a new heart, can be saved today and lost tomorrow. It's not teaching that.

II. Professing Christians can and do fall from grace.

Secondly, this passage is teaching that professing Christians can and do fall from grace. Professing Christians can and do fall from grace. You understand the difference: I'm saying that true Christians, those who are truly saved, those who are in union and communion with Jesus Christ, they can never fall away from grace — never; that God, having begun a good work, will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. But professing Christians, those who, like this man in the Iron Cage, who thought to himself and persuaded himself that he was a true professor of faith in Jesus Christ and managed to persuade others that he was a true professor of faith in Jesus Christ, such people can and do fall from grace. The Bible is littered with examples of such. "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present evil world," Paul says. He talks about Hymenaeus and Philetus; Judas...Judas was a professor of faith in Jesus Christ. He convinced his fellow disciples that he was a professor of faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus called him a disciple. He was one of the twelve. He persuaded others. He was capable of performing miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. He even manages to cast out demons in the name of Jesus Christ, but he falls away. He was a professor of faith in Jesus Christ, but he wasn't a true believer in Jesus Christ.

You see, what the Bible does is that it speaks of our profession as it finds it. It speaks of Christians according to the language of phenomenon. When Paul speaks of disciples of Jesus Christ falling away, he's saying to you, that's what they were. They were disciples of Jesus Christ. He's not saying they were true disciples of Jesus Christ; he's *not saying* that they were elect; he's *not saying* that they were those whom God had predestined from before the foundation of the world; he's *not saying* that they were those whose stony hearts had been taken away and to whom had been given new hearts of faith and trust, and love and commitment, in Jesus Christ.

No: he's saying they were professors of faith in Jesus Christ, and others recognized their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. They became members of their local community church. Some of them became office bearers in their local community churches, but they still fell away. And both of those truths...both of those truths have to be held together: True believers can never fall from grace, but those who make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ can and, alas, do fall from grace.

Hebrews 6 tells us the extent to which they {professors} may experience the work of the Holy Spirit but fall short of true regenerating grace. They have been

enlightened, Hebrews 6 says. They taste of the heavenly gift. John Owen says, "They taste it, but they don't swallow it." It doesn't become a part of their being. They experience profound impressions of the Holy Spirit — people like Saul. You remember what they said of King Saul: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" they said. Or Balaam, a hireling and a false prophet, but whom the Holy Spirit took into partnership. Or Judas, who preached and performed miracles and cast out demons and never once, apparently, raised any doubts in the minds of his fellow disciples. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of God."

Now, historians have conjectured that the man in the Iron Cage was someone that was known to John Bunyan, and there have been several suggestions including a Baptist minister who was born in 1638, by the name of John Child, who was an acquaintance of Bunyan himself, and who fell from the faith and whose conscience troubled him greatly, and a more widely accepted identification and one from the previous century, in the sixteenth century, a man by the name of Francis Spira — an Italian lawyer who professed faith in the time of John Calvin and later relapsed back into Catholicism. And he was widely interpreted and used in sermons — Calvin seems at one point to refer to him; Bunyan refers to him at least five times in the course of his writings — and it may well be Francis Spira who was the inspiration for Bunyan for this man in the Iron Cage.

III. There is a condition from which it is impossible to repent.

The third thing I want to say is that there is a condition from which it is impossible to repent. There is a condition from which it is impossible to repent.

This man in the Iron Cage says, "I cannot now repent." Hebrews 6 tells us categorically in verse 5 and 6. It says, "Having fallen away..." and then, "Having fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance."

Does this mean that a person may know that they are beyond forgiveness? Not only that repentance is not possible, but that you might be in a condition...in that condition, and know that you're in that condition? There's no doubt that this man in Bunyan's allegory believed he was in that condition.

Bunyan himself was plagued by the thought in his earlier life that he had committed the unpardonable sin. It's an issue that has troubled Christians down the ages: the sin of which Jesus speaks that there can be no forgiveness. What is that unpardonable sin? Some Christians have tried to identify it as a particular sin of some kind. Some have tried to identify it especially with Hebrews 6. Reformed theology generally has interpreted the unpardonable sin as the ultimate sin of unbelief: that the only sin from which there can be no forgiveness is the sin of unbelief. If you don't believe in Jesus Christ, you cannot be forgiven.

If you die in that condition, then there is no forgiveness. That's the unpardonable sin.

IV. Can a person be unable to repent and know they are lost for all eternity?

The question is not so much the identification of the unpardonable sin, but is it possible to be in a condition and know that you're in that condition of being unable to repent? And Reformed and Puritan and Presbyterian preachers down through the ages have tended to say that those who are concerned that they may have committed the unpardonable sin are in fact more than likely those who have not committed the unpardonable sin, because those who have committed the unpardonable sin are not troubled by it. But those who are deeply troubled and are longing to find some way of forgiveness but cannot find it, that in itself, troubling as all of that is, is a good sign. It is a sign that the way of grace and forgiveness is in fact still open.

And if you were to meet somebody like this man in the Iron Cage...supposing you were to meet somebody...I've certainly met a couple of people in my life who have come to me and have said, "I don't think I can ever be forgiven for what I've done." Some horrible, horrible crime, perhaps. More often than not, people who are troubled by this thing are troubled by it for something that is relatively trifling, you might think.

What would you say to a person who comes to you and says, "I think I have sinned against the Holy Spirit. I've sinned against the Light, and I've committed the unpardonable sin, and I've done what Hebrews 6 says there can be no forgiveness. There can be no repentance. I cannot repent now. I'm doomed now for the rest of my life to live in this miserable condition"? What would you say to a person like that?

I'm sure you would say 'The very fact that you are troubled by it is a good sign. And my Bible says that whoever confesses their sin, whoever acknowledges their sin and flees to Jesus Christ, He will in no wise cast out. Take your trouble, take this particular trouble and lay it at the feet of Jesus, and see that burden being removed and taken away.' I'm sure that's what you would try to do, and I think that would be a biblical thing to do. I think that would be the right thing to do.

So why is Bunyan giving Christian this picture at all? And why is he giving him this picture at the very beginning, at the very threshold of his Christian life? To encourage perseverance; to encourage holiness; to encourage a deep-seated concern to pursue God with all of our hearts, because unless you are doing that, you are in a dangerous, dangerous condition, because it is only those who persevere to the end, Jesus says, that shall be saved.

I have here a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and it was given to me on my birthday

in 1973—however many years ago that is. And it was given to me by a roommate of Rosemary, my wife, and I won't tell you her name. She signs her name in here, and there's an inscription in here, a Bible text from Psalm 128:1,2: "Blessed is everyone that feareth the Lord but walketh in His ways, for thou shalt eat the bread of thine hands. Happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee." That's what she wrote in my copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The week before graduation from University — as I recall now, she was studying law - her father, who was totally opposed to her evangelical Christianity, promised her that he would buy her this marvelous house if she renounced her profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and she did. And from that day to this day, she has never professed faith in Jesus Christ. It's one of those things that sends a shiver down my spine.

I'm not going to pronounce on what her end may be. I don't know. I suspect; and, as the years go by, I suspect even more...I leave that entirely up to God. I leave that entirely up to God. Many of us have tried to visit her and speak to her, and as the years go by it's got more and more difficult for us to do that. She won't even see her friends, her one-time friends, any more.

Any Bunyan is saying, Let that be a warning to you. Are you a professing Christian tonight? Yet you are dabbling in sin? With a high hand, recklessly, without regard for the consequences? Then let this be a warning to you, that it may be possible that you professed faith in Jesus Christ, but you are not a true and genuine believer.

I say to you tonight, run to Jesus Christ! Run to Him! Flee from that sin; persevere in the faith; hold the things of God dear in your heart; and, in the words of John Bunyan, see that man in the Iron Cage in absolute despair saying, "I have sinned against the Light, and I cannot now repent." And may we by the grace of God be delivered from that.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, as we come to the close of another Lord's Day in this very solemn way, and yet we see a light that shines — that shines from the cross of Jesus Christ, because no matter what our sin may be, no matter how heinous that sin may be, there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared. So grant us persevering grace even to the end, 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.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the web page. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template. Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any error to be with the transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permissions information, please visit the FPC Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).