

**Pilgrim's Progress:
Christiana's Story (4) –
On the Road to Vanity Fair**

Isaiah 66

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Now turn with me, if you have a Bible with you, to Isaiah 66, and I'm going to read the opening two verses of Isaiah 66. Before we read the passage, let's pray together.

Father, this is Your word holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Help us again to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Isaiah 66:

Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool; what is the house that you would build for Me, and what is the place of My rest? All these things My hand has made, And so all these things came to be," declares the Lord. "But this is the one to whom I will look: He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word."

And that's what we're going to see tonight: some dear folk humble, contrite, trembling at God's word.

Well, you remember how *Pilgrim's Progress* began in Part I:

"As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep: And as I slept, I dreamed a Dream."

Well, if you have your map with you tucked away in your copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* or in your Bible, we're at the top of the first column on the top left. We're at the Porter's Lodge outside Palace Beautiful, and we're going to traverse now half way up the second column through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and before that the Valley of Humiliation, and on towards (half way up the second column) Vanity and Vanity Fair. We won't quite get to Vanity this evening.

Well, Christiana and the boys have been at Porter's house outside Palace Beautiful, and a month has passed. And, as the boys have been ill, you remember, from eating sour apples, and a physician has given to Christiana twelve boxes of pills in readiness perhaps for future ailments that these boys are going to have (and we're going to see another one this evening), ahead of them lies the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and beyond it on the other side of the wilderness, a city called Vanity.

You remember what trouble the women had gotten into without the help of someone to guide them. And the eldest son, Matthew, now suggests to his mother that they send to Interpreter, that he might send back to them their wonderful guide, Mr. Great-heart. And so she does.

But before they leave, Christiana is shown some things now by a lady by the name of Prudence. Four things in particular: the apple that Eve ate and gave to her husband (the entrance of sin into the world); Jacob's ladder, with angels ascending on it, which they can't get enough of (a gospel picture...a picture of Christ); a golden anchor to lay hold on that which is beyond the vale, and to enable them to stand fast in turbulent weather; and the mount on which Abraham offered up Isaac, including the altar and the wood and the knife. These are gospel pictures. Bunyan was fond of painting gospel pictures—the entrance of sin, the way back to fellowship with God.

Well, then they sing in the dining room accompanied by the Virginals (an early kind of harpsichord). And then Mr. Great-heart, this wonderful, wonderful figure — Mr. Great-heart arrives, and he arrives with wine and parched corn, and pomegranates, and raisins for the children. Now this is seventeenth century England, so some of these are delicacies, to say the least. Raisins mightn't mean much to you, you understand, but to Bunyan in the seventeenth century, particularly I think after being in prison for twelve years, the very thought of a sumptuous meal with delicacies, I just think it made him beam all over!

Well, Mr. Great-heart arrives. And as they are about to leave, after they have eaten, a Porter pronounces a blessing upon the women and the children.

I. Be thankful for your spiritual leaders.

Now let me pause for a second to say something about Mr. Great-heart. There are three characters in *Pilgrim's Progress*, Parts I and II...there are three characters that are modeled after John Bunyan's pastor and friend, John Gifford.

John Gifford was the Separatist minister of the Baptist church in Bedford. He would die in 1655, five years before Bunyan would go to prison for twelve years. There is absolutely no doubt that Gifford had a profound effect on John Bunyan. John Bunyan learned his theology from this pastor, John Gifford. So Bunyan in

Pilgrim's Progress has three characters that are meant to convey a godly minister, a godly pastor; one who preaches and teaches and guides and directs and supports and points out the way, and is a wonderful model and example to the people of God.

One of course is Evangelist, the man who first appears in Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*, that bids Christian go in the direction of the Wicket Gate and warns him that it would be suicidal for him to follow the advice of Mr. Worldly-wiseman or to put his spiritual future into the hands of Mr. Legality. Evangelist.

Second is the very grave person with the best of books in his hand and the world behind his back that Christian had seen in the House of Interpreter.

The third is this man, Mr. Great-heart, and he is Interpreter's heroic servant who is appointed as a guide to Christiana and Mercy and the boys, to assure us that they make their journey to and beyond the River of Death. It's just a wonderful, wonderful picture - a man who's always explaining things to them, and always pointing out dangers to them, and killing giants along the way.

Gifford died in 1655, but not before he had lit a torch, I think, in John Bunyan.

One of the Puritan scholars, Christopher Hill, once said the difference between Part I and Part II of *Pilgrim's Progress* is that Part I is an allegory of the individual and Part II is an allegory of the church...and here is Bunyan saying (and here's the first lesson) to be thankful for your minister. (It would be self-serving for me to draw attention to myself, but be thankful for Ligon!) I think that's the first lesson here. A Mr. Great-heart...a Mr. Evangelist. But God gives these gifts, shepherds, ruling elders, who love the flock of God; who give themselves to protecting the flock of God; who teach and edify and instruct. "Remember those who lead, those who spoke to you the word of God and imitate their faith," the book of Hebrews says. That's the first lesson.

II. The importance of learning God's Word, the Psalms and hymns.

Well, they set off with Great-heart now, and Piety and Prudence as well as Christiana, Mercy, and the four boys. And Piety has forgotten something — a scheme, a map of things that they had seen in Interpreter's House, and as she goes back the rest of them overhear in a Grove, singing. Beautiful singing. And this is what they hear:

"Thro' all my Life thy Favour is
So frankly shew'd to me,
That in thy House for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be."

And then another line:

“For why? The Lord our God is good;
His Mercy is for ever sure:
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from Age to Age endure.”

Well, you recognize that of course as Psalm 100 and Psalm 23. They’re probably still for us here tonight our favorite Psalms, Psalm 100 and Psalm 23. Well, the version that Bunyan is citing here, they overhear—in the allegory, they overhear these Country birds singing these Psalms.

They are the Psalms translated into English by Thomas Sternhold. They had been translated over a century or more before John Bunyan. Between 1547 and 1549, Thomas Sternhold had translated nineteen Psalms into common meter. And they were bound in the back of copies of *The Geneva Bible*, and they were published separately, and over two hundred editions of them had been published in the century prior to Bunyan's teenage years. And then later on, in the seventeenth century, John Hopkins added to these Psalms. So here's Bunyan, and that's why this is an allegory of the church: It's corporate Psalm-singing. The people of God singing the Psalms of Zion. And these Country birds sing these songs. Bunyan says in the allegory:

“They are very fine company for us when we are melancholy; also they make the woods and groves and solitary places, places desirous to be in.”

You know, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away; a Psalm a day keeps the devil away.” That kind of thing Bunyan is saying. And here are the people of God profiting and being edified, but being encouraged and strengthened by the collective singing of the Psalms of David. That's the second lesson: the importance of learning the Psalms and learning the hymns of faith, and quote them when the devil tempts. When you're in a dark place, when melancholy takes over, sing these Psalms. Sing these hymns.

III. Expect to be humbled.

Well, they move on now to the Valley of Humiliation, and they see a Pillar, and on the Pillar is written:

“Let Christian's slips, before he came to hither, and the Battles that he met with in this place, be a warning to those that come after.”

Well, Christian, you see, has been here in the Valley of Humiliation.

This land is very fruitful. It's called the Valley of Humiliation, but it's a very fruitful

land with good soil. Bunyan is saying that humiliation is good for you. He sees a picture of a boy feeding his father's sheep, and he's singing this wonderful song. And then he says:

“Our Lord had a country house here, and loved to be here in the Valley of Humiliation, free from the bustle of the city.”

It was here that Samuel, one of the sons, recalls that Christian had his battle with Apollyon in the Valley of Humiliation. And as they're looking at this monument that bears testimony to Christian's battle with Apollyon, they see some of Christian's “blood on the stones to this day”, and “broken darts of Apollyon.”

Well, here's the lesson: Expect to be humbled. “Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due season.” Humble yourself, or else God will humble you.

IV. Unless you are prepared to die, you cannot experience true life.

Then they enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Now words of Lamentation, and the boys begin to quake, and the women grow pale. The ground begins to shake. They have to watch their feet now, because there are snares everywhere. And James begins to feel sick, and his mother remembers the twelve boxes of pills that she'd had for Matthew, and she gives James three of them. Joseph thinks he sees a fiend on the road ahead. His mother calls it “an ugly thing.” And Great-heart bids them stay close, and he quotes a word from Peter:

“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

Mercy looks back and thinks she sees a Lion coming, so Great-heart goes to the back and bids Mercy walk in front of him. It's the reality once again that Christian warfare, that the Christian life is a battle; that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world. And it's urging to faith and courage has a lesson here that the Christian life is a battle against a fierce, fierce, enemy. They go on. And they're still in this Valley, and there are smells now, and “great stinks,” Bunyan says. The boys are troubled by snares. They see a man who is cast into the ditch on the left side.

They come to a cave where Christian had done battle with a Giant, and the Giant accuses Great-heart of being a kidnapper of women and children. There's a swordfight now, and fire comes out of this Giant's nostrils, and Great-heart wins. And another Pillar is erected, and another poem is said.

They're now at the place where Faithful first encountered Christian (or Christian first encountered Faithful) in Part I. And a character now comes into the allegory

called Mr. Honest. And Mr. Honest and Christiana and Great-heart engage now in a lengthy conversation about a man who had been this way before, called Mr. Fearing. Honest says about Mr. Fearing,

“He was a man that had the Root of the matter in him, but he was one of the most troublesome Pilgrims that ever I met with in all my days...Why should such a good man spend all his days in such a darkness?”

Mr. Honest asks. And Great-heart answers, “The wise God will have it so.”

He says — and hear this — Great-heart is explaining now something about Mr. Fearing. Is there a Mr. Fearing in the building tonight? You know what Great-heart says about him? “He played on the bass string.” He really didn't have a song. Everything was always dark, and everything was always somber.

Well, they now arrive at the Inn called Gaius. Gaius is a lover of Pilgrims, and there's a cook there called Taste-that-which-is-good. (I think Bunyan liked his food!) He tells them—Gaius, now, at this Inn—he tells them of Christian's relatives. Christian has been here before. He speaks of Stephen, who was killed; James, who was slain by the sword; of Paul and Peter in their martyrdom; of Ignatius, that was cast into irons; of Romanus, whose flesh was torn from him; of Polycarp, who played the man in the fire.

You know in the seventeenth century, reading *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* was one of the great edifying things that families did. They read their Bibles, but they read the stories of the *Book of Martyrs* that Foxe wrote—horrible stories of men and women and children who were killed for their love of Jesus Christ. Do you know what that did? It brought a realism into what Christianity is. It brought a realism into what a disciple is. It brought a realism into what following Jesus Christ is. It's not all about me; it's all about Him. And unless you are prepared to take up a cross and follow after Him, unless you are prepared to die, you cannot experience true life.

Yes, even in Part II where the story is about two women and four boys, there is still this—well, can I say it?—masculine nature of what Christianity is really about.

V. Christ will never let go those who are truly His.

Now there are wedding bells in the air, because Gaius suggests to Matthew—and some of you think Matthew was only three or four, but Gaius is suggesting to Matthew that he marry Mercy. It's a beautiful thing. You know, I think it was Roland Bainton (my esteemed scholars in the back row there may correct me, but I think it was Roland Bainton) who wrote this wonderful biography of Luther, who said that in Puritan times they married in order to fall in love. You know we fall in love in order to marry, but they married in order to fall in love. So at the

drop of a hat there's this arranged marriage between Matthew and Mercy.

And then Great-heart and Gaius go off into the woods, and they slay a Giant by the name of Slay-good, who's been troubling Pilgrims in this way. And they find him, but he has captured a man by the name of Mr. Feeble-mind. Mr. Feeble-mind...and he was preparing (Slay-good, the Giant) was preparing to kill him. And Great-heart slays the Giant, rescues Feeble-mind, and brings him back to the Inn. He's from the town called Uncertain. He has been determined to be a Pilgrim despite his weakness. (You see, this is why I like Part II of *Pilgrim's Progress*, because the characters in Part II, many of them are weak and feeble. They believe, but they're crying out, "Help my unbelief!" You know Spurgeon said even if your faith is as thin as a spider's thread, if it is lodged in Christ, it is saving faith. And here is the heart of Bunyan now, the pastor in 1684, after spending two periods in prison, one of twelve years and one of six or seven months, but now pasturing in this congregation and meeting Christians whose faith was weak.) And Bunyan, in the second edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, went and wrote little marginal comments. And at this point, when this man Feeble-mind...he says about him, "Mark this," and he says it twice...that because he was taken by the Giant unwillingly, Feeble-mind had said he would not be killed. He had been taken unwillingly, so he would not be killed. He understood, you see, that Christ will never ever let go of those who are truly His.

And then to balance it, another lesson in the same paragraph: "That I have resolved to run when I can; to go when I cannot run; and to creep when I cannot go." And it's a beautiful picture of somebody who's determined to persevere even if he's crawling on hands and knees, and making almost no progress whatsoever, he is determined to persevere, because it is only they who persevere to the end that will be saved. You see, God will never let go, but we must also persevere. And these two truths taught in this same paragraph, and from this weak character, Feeble-mind, is a lesson about the preservation of God but a lesson about the perseverance of the saints.

Well, they spend two months in Gaius's house. It's a time of refreshment now, after all their journeys. There are days and weeks, yes, and months like that. We are beside still waters; our cup is running over. God has prepared for us a table to feast from.

And there's another wedding. Not only Matthew to Mercy, but James (another son) to Phoebe, the daughter of Gaius. Well, don't you love a double wedding? What a marvelous story! Actually there are going to be four weddings, because there are another two weddings in next week's part of it.

So off they go now, once again, after these two weddings. And they're heading towards Vanity — the city of Vanity. Wasn't that perhaps one of Bunyan's most graphic pictures of this world with all of its allurements? It is Las Vegas with all of its temptations and all of its pleasure-seeking, me-centered, lust-gratifying

complexity. But there is no way to heaven but through the city of Vanity. There is no way to heaven but through that city. Through it they must go, and we'll pick up that story next time.

Let's pray together.

Lord, we thank You for John Bunyan. Though dead, he still speaks to us. And we thank You for these lessons: lessons about godliness; lessons about perseverance; lessons about the place of prayer; lessons about Your covenant faithfulness. Your promises are yea and amen in Jesus Christ. To some perhaps here tonight who have come fresh from battle with the wicked one, we pray that You would surround them now with a sense of Your presence and of Your peace, and of Your benediction. To those, O Lord, who have not left the City of Destruction, who have not yet entered the Wicket Gate, who have not yet come to the foot of the Cross, whose Burden has not yet been lifted, we pray that even this study might awaken them to their great need. So bless us, we pray, and all of this in Jesus' name. 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.

[Congregation sings *The Doxology*]

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