

**Pilgrims Progress:  
Christiana's Story (1) –  
The Journey Begins**

**Luke 18:9-14**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

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Well, good evening. We come now to a brand new series that will last through October and November. Somewhere at the entrance and exit points there'll be an outline of the seven lessons in the Second Part of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

I'm not going to go very far down the journey tonight...just going to introduce the story and a little bit of background, and give you some homework. [You didn't know there was homework?] There's homework for you, and you've got two weeks now to do what you really should have done before tonight, and that is read the story of Christiana and her family.

I fell in love with John Bunyan when I was converted. Within a year or so, somebody gave me...a friend gave me a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*. That was in 1971, 1972–35 or 36 years ago, and it has been my companion ever since.

I have to say, though, that those who know the story of *Pilgrim's Progress* well usually know the first part of the story; and if I were to do a straw poll (which I won't) I'd be curious to know how many of you know the second part as well as you know the first part — the story of Christiana and her four boys, Matthew, Samuel, Joseph, and James.

Well, Christiana gets converted tonight. And when she awakes from a dream in the morning (which we'll talk about in a minute), she utters the words of the parable that Jesus tells in Luke 18 — the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner... God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Let's read together from Luke 18, and beginning at the ninth verse. This is God's word. Before we read it, let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You once again for the Scriptures — the holy, inerrant word of God. Now come by Your Spirit, and grant us Your blessing; for unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. So hear us, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

He also told a parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Courteous companions, some time since, to tell you my Dream that I had of Christian the Pilgrim, and of his dangerous Journey towards the Celestial Country, was pleasant to me, and profitable to you. I told you then also what I saw concerning his Wife and Children, and how unwilling they were to go with him on Pilgrimage; insomuch that he was forced to go on his Progress without them; for he durst not run the danger of that destruction, which he feared would come, by staying with them in the City of Destruction: Wherefore, as I then shewed you, he left them and departed.

Now, it hath so happened, through the multiplicity of business, that I have been much hindred and kept back from my wonted Travels into those parts whence he went, and so could not, till now, obtain an opportunity to make further enquiry after whom he left behind, that I might give you an account of them. But having had some concerns that way of late, I went down again thitherward. Now having taken up my lodgings in a Wood, about a mile off the place, as I slept, I dreamed again.

Well, that's how Bunyan begins the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, "In the Similitude of a Dream" — the story of Christiana and the four boys, Matthew, Samuel, Joseph, and James.

Bunyan, you remember, was married twice. His first wife, to whom he was married about six or seven years...we don't know her name. Some biographies may suggest to you that her name was Mary, though there is no proof whatsoever that that is right. We simply don't know her name. They had four children. The first one was Mary. Mary was born blind. She died when she was about fifteen years old, when Bunyan was in prison. It grieved him terribly. He loved her with a great affection, and if you know anything about John Bunyan, he loved people and he loved his wife and he loved his children, but he had a particular fondness for Mary. And when he was incarcerated, he tells us in *The Holy War*, a book that he published in between Part One and Part Two of

*Pilgrim's Progress*, he tells us just how much of a burden that was for him to leave his little Mary (then about ten or so) behind.

Well, he had four children — Mary, John, and Thomas, and Elizabeth. And his first wife died. Just before he was imprisoned, he remarried...a few years...two or three years later he would remarry to another lady by the name of Elizabeth. She gave birth to a stillborn child just weeks before John Bunyan was imprisoned. And so she was left to raise the four children by herself while he was in prison; and he would of course spend twelve years in prison before being released, and then he would be imprisoned again for about six to eight months a little later. I just can't work out from the biographies, because none of them tell me accurately, but two other children were born to Bunyan...to Elizabeth and John Bunyan...by the names of Sarah and Joseph. And it certainly looks as though they were born to him either during his imprisonment or immediately afterwards. She was allowed to visit him when he was in prison. (There's the answer to that question, which we won't go into now!) But six children in all.

And of course I'm saying that because the background to the story of Part Two undoubtedly lies in his own experience of family and his own experience of a wife who had been left alone with four children while he was in prison, and there's no doubt that that explains why Christiana has four children.

Well, Christian in Part One had made his journey to various places along the way with Hopeful, in the end crossing the River and into the Celestial City. So in the allegory Christian is now dead, and Christiana is a widow. He had made the journey with Hopeful. Faithful, you remember, had been martyred in the City called Vanity. He had left behind his wife and four children. You remember the moving part of that story, where when Christiana is pleading with him to return, he put his fingers in his ears and cried, "Life! Life! Eternal life!" and didn't look back.

Now Bunyan was criticized after the publication of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Part One, in 1678. After the publication of Part One...in between Part One and Part Two there's a six-year gap between the publications of Part One and Part Two...Part One was a runaway success. It was read in England and Wales and Ireland and Holland, and in New England and Scotland, and many places around the world of the seventeenth century. It was a runaway success, but it was not without its critics. And one of the criticisms leveled against Part One of *Pilgrim's Progress* was that Bunyan had written a story encouraging a man to leave his wife and children. And there were attempts made by anonymous writers to improve upon the allegory, and especially to improve upon what many felt was a tragic tale of leaving Christiana and the four boys behind. One critic in particular, Thomas Sherman—the book was written by somebody called T.S., and scholars now think it was a man by the name of Thomas Sherman—he was a "General Baptist," not a "Particular Baptist." Bunyan was a Particular Baptist. Thomas Sherman was a General Baptist, and without going into too many details, General Baptists didn't

like the Calvinism of Particular Baptists like Bunyan, and Bunyan was a thoroughgoing Calvinist to his fingertips, and then some. And so to improve on what he thought (Thomas Sherman)...what he saw was narrow doctrine of John Bunyan, a "Part Two" was published a couple of years after Part One. It spurred John Bunyan on to write the sequel, Part Two of the story, and it was published in 1684, six years after the publication of Part One.

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* of course has been criticized elsewhere. Even C.S. Lewis was strongly critical of Bunyan's narrow theology. He was also critical of Bunyan's literary style, but you'd expect that, perhaps. One of the objections that was made against *Pilgrim's Progress, Part One* was the lack of family life, the lack of communal life, the lack of church life. The allegory is about an individual: an individual's conversion; an individual's journey; an individual's fight, warfare against the enemy, against Satan. It's a man's tale. The principle characters, Hopeful and Faithful and Christian, are all men, and they're a certain kind of man — they're heroic characters. They're valiant characters. We sang it dreadfully this evening (and worse than that!), but the hymn of course occurs in Part Two of *Pilgrim's Progress*. They are absolutely wonderful words:

"He who would true valiant be,  
Let him come hither."

It's a story of a hero. It's a man's tale.

Well, Part Two is a woman's tale. Now, I don't want the men to leave or to switch off, now, because there are plenty of men in Part Two! But it is a sequel, and it is a story about godly women. It's like the story of Sarah, or the story of Hannah, or the story of Naomi, or the story of Elizabeth, or the story of Mary in the Bible. Great stories from a woman's point of view. It's not just a story about a woman, or women (in this case Christiana and her faithful, somewhat timid and fearful friend, Mercy), but it's also of course about family.

Now Bunyan of course is a Puritan. He's in the seventeenth century. He's at the very heart and core of Puritan England. Bunyan had been a soldier. He'd run away from home as a teenager and joined the military on the Parliamentary side, against the Royalists in the English civil war. He'd seen things, no doubt, of great manly exploits in the civil war in England. He knew Cromwell.

But Part Two is a gentler story. It's written, of course, when Bunyan is out of prison, when Bunyan has become the minister, the pastor, of the Bedford Baptist Church, and the overseer and preacher at large of several other Baptist churches in Bedfordshire and some surrounding counties in England. He's at home now. He's at home with his second wife, Elizabeth. One of his own daughters is called Elizabeth, but his second wife is also called Elizabeth. And the six children. And what Bunyan had learned in coming out of prison where he was all alone and solitary and fighting the good fight of faith for himself, as it were, is now a very

different story.

He had discovered that what had kept that Baptist church in Bedford alive — and you must remember that the Baptist church in the 1670's was under tremendous persecution. It was regarded as a sect. They were regarded as independents. They weren't Anglicans. They weren't part of the established church. That's why Bunyan ends up in prison, because of his refusal to worship in the established church—his refusal to stop preaching, because he wasn't officially ordained by the establishment. But neither was he a Presbyterian. That had a degree of tolerance, even after the restoration of King Charles II in 1660. Following Charles' restoration in 1660, you know, 1650's...that's the only decade that England has ever been a republic, and it failed...and it failed miserably, the restoration brought a renewal of persecution. Two thousand ministers were ejected from their livelihoods in 1662. Some of the great Puritan names that we still love and read today were ejected from their living. And in the wake of that, in 1662, in the wake of that act, Bunyan is incarcerated. He's put in prison.

Now what kept that church alive during that period was, yes, women — as is so often the case. And Bunyan is almost forced to consider the role of women in the Christian life, and in the Christian home especially, and in the rearing of children.

The tale begins a little awkwardly. Bunyan begins the story as I've just read it. He comes within a mile or so of the City of Destruction, he falls asleep, and he begins to dream. But instead of seeing Christiana and engaging in conversation with her in the dream, he meets a Narrator and an Interlocutor, a Mr. Sagacity. And the tale is told somewhat awkwardly from one person to another person to another person, and then when they come to the Wicket Gate, it's as though Bunyan realizes the story is not going to flow unless it's done in the first person, and the Narrator (Mr. Sagacity) disappears.

He inquires about Christian. Does he know him? Oh, yes, he knows him. His tale is known throughout the district. It's a reference, of course, to the popularity to Part One of *Pilgrim's Progress*. And what about Christiana, and what about the four boys? And he hears, to his great surprise and great joy, that Christiana and the four boys are packing up their goods and they are leaving the City of Destruction, and they are bound on the journey that Christian had taken.

Christiana's had a dream. She's had a couple of dreams. And in the dream she has seen her late husband, and he's in heaven now, and he has a crown of gold. And he's surrounded by angels and beautiful messengers that he had met along the way, and the sound of glorious music.

Some say that he now walks in white! that he has a chain of Gold about his neck, that he has a crown of Gold, beset with Pearls, about his head. Others say, that the shining Ones that sometimes shewed themselves to him in his Journey, are become his companions, and that he is as familiar

with them in the place where he is, as here one neighbour is with another. Besides, 'tis confidently affirmed concerning him, that the King of the place where he is, has bestowed upon him already, a very rich and pleasant dwelling at Court, and that he every day eateth and drinketh, and walketh and talketh with him, and receiveth of the smiles and favours of him that is Judge of all there.

Well, this is what she sees, and as she sees this in her dream, she wakes up in the morning and she feels terribly guilty about how she treated him, and perhaps drove him away from her; and that she ought to have listened to his pleas to leave the City of Destruction.

And so begins the tale, and I want to think of it along a few lines of thought by way of an introduction this evening, because it's first of all a gospel story.

### **I. A gospel story.**

It's a gospel story, like Part One, Part Two is a gospel story. It's a story of salvation. It's the salvation of Christiana. It's the salvation of a woman called Mercy. It's the salvation of the children — the four boys.

Bunyan was a Puritan, and everything he wrote was shaped by the gospel, and this allegory that he's giving us here, it's an allegory of the gospel, of how God saves us, of how God rescues us and delivers us from our sin. And for Bunyan, it was about substitution and satisfaction. It was about Another who lives for us and dies for us, and meets all the demands of gospel righteousness in Himself.

There will be a point later on when we come to the Cross that Bunyan will have page after page about the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, and the doctrine of imputed righteousness. It's a very important issue just now in our own denomination. There are some, as you're well aware, in the so-called "New Perspectives on Paul" and "Federal Vision" and so on who are denying the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. And Bunyan has several pages in which he goes into great length arguing the absolute necessity of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

After Christian has gone over the River and she hears no more about him, she is sorry then for what she has done, and a burden begins to grow. It's not the same kind of burden that Christian had. It's not to the same extent. It's not the overwhelming burden that Christian had.

Bunyan is being a pastor. Not everybody comes to Jesus in exactly the same fashion. They come for the same reason — to have their sins forgiven — but one is burdened with a great burden, and another comes at the very first invitation. Cesar Milan, whose hymns we sometimes sing, the French performer...and a

couple of his hymns are in our hymnbook...said that "Christ awakens some as a mother awakens her children from their sleep with a kiss, and some are converted like Saul of Tarsus." I can give you a day and an hour and a minute if I would be pressed on it. Rosemary couldn't tell you a day when she didn't believe. And not all are brought in in precisely the same way, but all will come to Jesus, and all will trust in Him.

She's visited by a man who's called Secret, and he brings a message from the Merciful One, an invitation to come into His presence. It's a beautiful statement of effectual calling. Jesus is calling her into His presence, and she feels it, and she is aware of it—that there is this divine call that is drawing her into the embrace of Christ. And he comes with a message that God is

"...ready to forgive, and that he taketh Delight to multiply the pardon of offences. He also would have thee know, that he inviteth thee to come into his Presence, to his Table, and that he will feed thee with the fat of his house, and with the heritage of Jacob thy father."

It's a gospel story.

## **II. It's a journey.**

And it's also a road story. It's a road trip. It's a journey; it's a pilgrimage. Now, books about pilgrimages of course were very popular in the medieval period, and there were many in the sixteenth and seventeenth century also, of course. *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer, in 1380-something wrote *Canterbury Tales*. Of course, that was a Catholic book, because in those pilgrimages you got indulgences. Bunyan is writing a Protestant equivalent, saying that there is absolutely nothing that we can do to merit the favor of God, but there is still a journey. It's a journey that begins at the door of conversion. It's a journey that then we must fight the good fight of faith. It's a journey that will meet with opposition and difficulty and trials along the way. It's a journey that eventually leads to the Celestial City and to the crown of Gold, and into the presence of the Merciful One.

It begins with a passage through the Wicket Gate, just like Christian went through the Wicket Gate, where one leaves the world behind and there's no going back. One knocks at this gate and gains entrance, and then one travels along the Highway of Holiness to that eternal city. It's a story of a trip, a journey with many adventures. And Secret says to Christiana at the very outset, "Thou must through troubles, as did he that went before thee, enter the Celestial City." (Reciting, of course, words that Paul learned when he visited the city of Lystra: "It is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God.")

### **III. It's a family story.**

It's also a family story. It's a story about a woman; it's a story about a widow and the difficulty of raising four children alone. It's a story about the influence of family religion. The world of Part One, as I said, is the world of men, and it's the world of heroes, and it's the world of masculinity; but this is much more gentle in Part Two.

Women in the church in Bedford had raised their awareness in Bunyan's consciousness when he was released from prison. There's even a delightful story of the women wanting to meet in a separate women's prayer meeting, and the minutes of the Bedford church suggest that Bunyan refused it. Well, whether you agree or disagree with Bunyan's verdict, of course the fact is that women were very much on the agenda in the 1670's.

### **IV. It's a story of battle.**

But it's also, and finally, a war story, for it's a story of a fight. Fight the good fight of faith. "He who would true valor see, Let him come hither." You want to see Christian courage, you want to see Christian fortitude, you want to see what faith at work is like not just in a Christian man, but in a Christian woman? You want to see an example of faith at work in a Christian woman? Well, here it is. Right at the very start of her journey, Christiana meets two ill-favored ones, a bit like Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*:

"What shall we do with this woman?" they say, "for she cries out for mercy, waking and sleeping. If she is suffered to go as she begins, we shall lose her, as we have lost her husband."

So they plot to distract her thoughts. The devil is always doing that. The devil is always doing that, and particularly with those who are thinking about coming to Jesus Christ. He will do his utmost to insure that not one of his will be lost, either.

No sooner has Christiana's family set out than they are met by two neighbor women, Timorous and Mercy. Timorous tries to talk Christiana out of her plan by recalling that trouble came upon Christian. And she urges Christiana, and especially the "four sweet babes," as she calls them — the four little boys — she urges her not to go on this foolish journey. And she returns. But Mercy decides to "walk this sun-shine morning, a little way with her, to help her on the Way."

Now that's fascinating. Because the only reason why Mercy initially begins to go with Christiana is because she's a friend. She doesn't go because she feels her burden of her sin so much; she goes because she's invited by a friend. Indeed, she doesn't feel that she has been invited by the Merciful One. She doesn't have this invitation that Christiana has. And Bunyan is doing some marvelous,



marvelous pastoral work here. And God will call some directly and powerfully, and almost instantaneously, but others He'll woo and draw, and get into conversation with this one, and perhaps start attending church and under the means of grace and reading the Bible, all because a friend has introduced them to this in a gentle sort of way. Fascinating — when they come to the Slough of Despond, that these two women pass through it much easier than Christian did.

Bunyan cites the text, Luke 1:45. It's the text about Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. (Remember, his second wife is called Elizabeth.) "Blessed is she that believed, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her of the Lord." Words of great comfort and reassurance, then, to Christiana and Mercy.

And then when they come to the Wicket Gate, Christiana of course gained entrance almost immediately, and she's inside and then remembers that Mercy is still outside. And Mercy has knocked, but no one has answered. And her knocks have grown a little louder, but in the end she has swooned. She has fallen down, as it were, in despair. And it's Christiana who pleads with the Gatekeeper for her friend who is outside, and it's a beautiful illustration of an answer to prayer in evangelism for a friend of ours who is outside. And the Gatekeeper goes outside and begins to converse with her, and brings her in. Mercy says to the Gatekeeper,

"I am come for that unto which I was never invited, as my friend Christiana was. Hers was from the King, and mine was but from her: Wherefore I fear I presume."

She's frightened to come in. She doesn't think that God wants her. She doesn't think that she can enter this Gate, because she doesn't have this direct call that Christiana has.

That's where Part Two differs from Part One:

Part One is about strong people and heroic people, but Part Two is about weak people, and fearful people, and timorous people who are frightened of presuming upon the grace of God; and, yes, that's why she's called Mercy, because she receives mercy. She's called Mercy because God was merciful to her, to one who is weak; to one who, at least at this stage, has only a little faith. Faith, so long as it is rooted in Jesus, even if it's as thin as a spider's thread, it's saving faith if it's rooted in Jesus Christ.

And she comes in. Christiana and Mercy. A strong woman, to be sure, in Christiana, but a weak and timorous woman in Mercy. And the journey has just begun, because before them now lies...well, there are a few things around the Wicket Gate, not least some barking Dogs which we need to look at. But before them is the House of Interpreter. You remember the fearful image in the House of Interpreter that Christian saw? A Man in an Iron Cage, who had sinned against

the Light and could not get out. And Christiana and Mercy will see that vision, too. They're on the road to the Celestial City, and it will be strewn with all kinds of tales and all kinds of situations and conflicts, and plenty of opposition from the wicked one. And we will watch God's hand bring them, as He will bring each one of us who trusts in Jesus Christ, into fellowship with Jesus in His nearer presence in the Celestial City.

Well, let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You for this tale. And as we study it together we pray that we may be drawn not just to the tale, but drawn to embrace our Savior afresh and love Him more, and to hide the promises of Your word within our hearts, that we might not sin against You. Hear us, Lord, 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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