

**Pilgrims's Progress:  
Christiana's Story (2) –  
The House of Interpreter**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

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We're going to begin by reading a Scripture together. It's a Scripture that Bunyan cites. There is a point in tonight's part of the story where Mercy, the companion of Christiana, is outside the gates, the Wicket Gate. She hasn't yet entered, and she fears that she may not get in. She fears that the day of reckoning might come, and she is outside. And Bunyan cites a verse from Matthew 24, and we'll read that section to begin with — Matthew 24, beginning at verse 36 and reading down to verse 44. Before we read the passage, let's pray together.

*O Lord our God, we thank You once again for the Scriptures, for Your word which is true and cannot be broken. We ask Your blessing now as we read this Scripture together, that by Your Spirit You would write it upon our hearts. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were feasting and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

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

Now let me just briefly, quickly, remind ourselves of where we are in the story of

Christiana and her four sons — Matthew, Samuel, Joseph, and James — and her friend, Mercy. Christiana is now a widow. Her husband Christian, in Part I of the story, has left home and has been converted. He has gone all the way to the Celestial City. In the allegory, he has died and he has gone to heaven. And now Christiana, a widow with four “young babes” (as they’re called several times in the section that we’re looking at this evening)... Christiana and her friend Mercy are now going to make their way along this journey — the same journey. They don't go to every single location that Christian went, but they will travel the high spots, the great centers of concern that Bunyan focuses on in Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Christiana has had a dream, and in the dream she has seen her husband — her husband in heaven surrounded by beauty and glory. And she awakes in the morning and she is convicted. She is convicted of her sin. She is convicted as to why it was she hadn't gone with her husband; why her husband had been forced, you remember, to put his fingers in his ears and cry, “Life! Life! Eternal life!” and make his way to the Wicket Gate.

When she awakes in the morning she is visited by a man who's called Secret. And Secret brings to Christiana a letter. It's a letter that is perfumed and bears this wonderful aroma, and it's a personal invitation to Christiana to come...to come and enter into that joy that her husband had known. It's Bunyan's way of depicting an effectual call of Jesus Christ to come into a saving relationship with Him. For Christiana, the invitation is very clear and very bold, and she's more than aware of this call that she has been given to come. Mercy, her friend, has no letter. She at first isn't aware of any call. She's just a friend of Christiana's, and she goes on this journey initially at least because she is Christiana's friend.

So Christiana and Mercy and the boys, the “sweet babes” Matthew, Samuel, Joseph, and James... [Now remember Bunyan, when he was writing Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*, had four children. Now he was to have two more children by his second wife, Elizabeth, but it's not, I think, insignificant that this Christiana has four children.] So they make their way towards the Wicket Gate.

They pass through the Slough of Despond. It's not such an ordeal for the two women as it was for Christian. Christian, you remember, was burdened with an enormous weight. He was burdened by the guilt of sin to a degree that Christiana is not. Now Christiana is burdened by sin; that's what begins the journey for her. She wakes up in the morning and begins to reflect on some of the things that she had said to her husband, and yes, there's some measure of the guilt of sin. But it's not the profound weight that her husband had.

What is Bunyan doing? Bunyan is now of course... When *Pilgrim's Progress*, Part II, is written, six years after the publication of Part I, probably ten years after the writing of Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan is out of prison. He's been twelve years in prison; he's out of prison, and he's now the pastor of the Baptist

church in Bedford. Bunyan isn't writing an autobiographical story, which is what Part I was about. He had gone through an excruciating four or five years of conviction of sin before he came to an assurance of faith. But now as a pastor he's meeting all kinds of people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ not so dramatically as he had come to faith in Jesus Christ. The French hymn writer I love to cite every now and then says that sometimes Jesus awakens His children as a mother awakens her infants from their sleep with a kiss. You know, you can shake them awake or you can just kiss them awake. Both are awakened, but some more dramatically than others, and Bunyan is being sensitive to the different ways that we come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. There's only one way of salvation: Faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. But our testimonies... if we were to give our testimonies, my wife and I have a very, very different testimony. I can give you a date and an hour, and if you press me I could even hazard a guess at a minute when I came to faith. It was very sudden, it was very dramatic. My wife will tell you, on the other hand, that she can barely remember a day when she didn't believe. She was awakened like an infant from her sleep with a kiss. And Bunyan is being sensitive to that.

Well, they come to the Wicket Gate. Bunyan now introduces us to a character, the Lord of the Way. Christiana has knocked on the gate, and she has knocked several times on the gate, and knocked so loudly that a Dog, a mastiff, has begun to bark. (If you're following the map you will see that right at the Wicket Gate is Beelzebub's Castle and the Devil's Garden, and that is what Bunyan is talking about. He's introduced it in Part I.) And this Dog is barking and these women are terrified, so they start knocking and now they don't know what to do! And after a while, she knocks on the gate again and the Lord of the Way answers and bids her come in. And she answers, interestingly... and don't be offended now...but Bunyan is Baptist, and all four boys enter with her. They, too, come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. It's so interesting that Bunyan would have done that in the allegory at that point.

The point is, however, that Mercy is still outside. The tale goes on for a while, and Christiana is talking to the Lord of the Way. And then Mercy, still outside of the gate... suddenly Christiana begins to pray for her, begins to plead for her. It's Bunyan's way of describing the importance of friendship evangelism (well, I think that's what we would call it today in our twenty-first century language). But Bunyan is saying that friendships are important, and Christiana is praying for her friend who is outside and doesn't seem to have a sense that she is being called.

She's terrified. Mercy is a fragile creature. You know, Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress* is about heroes; it's a man's story about Christian and Faithful, and it's about Hopeful. And these are strong vibrant characters. But Mercy — Mercy is a tender soul. She's often shaking. She's often afraid. And she has knocked but no one has answered, and she has swooned — fainted — outside the door. And when the door of the Way opens, the Lord revives her and brings her in, in the gentlest of manners. And there's a fascinating section when He does bring her in. Bunyan

is, I think, reflecting on the different ways that Christians experience what we call *effectual calling* — the way God calls us into fellowship; some dramatically, some gently.

Now literary commentators and those who don't like Bunyan's Calvinism (and Bunyan was a Calvinist with a capital C and a capital A and a capital L. He was a true blue, no holds barred Calvinist. He subscribed to Reformed theology with a vengeance, without apology. Some of his early writings are fierce in battle against those whom he thought were in error.)

Now there are those today who think that what Bunyan is doing here is that later in life he's saying that Christiana is brought in because she's elect and Mercy is brought in because — well, she's non-elect; God is gracious to her, too. Well, that of course is pure nonsense. It's unbiblical. Bunyan would not accede to that in any way, shape, or form. So beware of little comments that you might find in your copy, whichever one that is, of *Pilgrim's Progress*. No, I think Bunyan is describing how we come to faith in Jesus Christ differently, and the importance of prayer, the importance of praying for friends and loved ones.

Well, now they move on, and the next part of the journey is of course the House of Interpreter—but not until something astonishing, something unexpected happens. The two ladies are on their own. They are making their way from the Wicket Gate to the House of Interpreter, and they are beset upon by Ill-favored Ones. And it's unexpected. These two men suddenly set upon these two ladies and attempt to ravage these two ladies. There's an attempt at rape here. It's unexpected. You wouldn't have expected it in this allegory. It's a sign of the seventeenth century. It was a wicked, violent, evil society. And we think we live in that kind of society, but Bunyan is saying this story is as if it is written today. And here are these two women, and they are beset upon. And they are helped. At the last minute, a Reliever comes to help them and scattered these two Ill-favored Ones away.

And later on in the passage the women ask why had the Reliever not come sooner? Or why, knowing that the terrain was difficult and beset with people like this, had the Man at the Gate not given to the two women someone to protect them from the very start? And the answer is that they never asked. Because they never asked. And the lesson that Bunyan weaves into the story is a profoundly pastoral one: that sometimes we don't appreciate the help that God gives us until we have to cry out to God for it.

Now that's a very Puritan thing. It's a very seventeenth century insight. It's a very biblical thing; it's a very helpful thing. Why does God allow you to pass through trials? So that in the trials you might cry out to God and experience His deliverance, or experience His presence, or experience His reassurance and appreciate it all the more for having been so close to the very brink.

Now when they come to the House of Interpreter — you remember it was a fearsome sight for Christian. One of the things that Christian saw in the House of Interpreter was the Man in the Iron Cage — a depiction of a man who had professed to be a Christian, but had left off his profession and could no longer repent. It was an understanding, I think, that Bunyan had of that fearful passage in Hebrews 6, and it was based after a very well-known story about a man in Italy in the earlier part of the seventeenth century (perhaps it might even have been in the sixteenth century) who... the tale of this man who had been a professing Christian, but had left off his profession. And this tale had been told and retold, especially in Puritan England and on the Continent. I think Bunyan is using that tale in the allegory.

Well, these seven things are retold very briefly, but there are seven more things.

Now, who is Interpreter in the allegory? Interpreter in the allegory is the minister of the gospel, and the minister of the gospel for Bunyan, of course, was the Baptist preacher in Bedford, John Gifford. John Gifford had a profound influence on John Bunyan. He was an extraordinary preacher. He was a wonderful pastor. He had unusual insights into the Bible, and there's no doubt in my mind that Bunyan is using his knowledge of John Gifford, the minister of the church while John Bunyan was in prison for twelve years...that's who Interpreter is.

But now, you understand, in Part II Interpreter has more things to say because that's what ministers of the gospel should be like, they should be growing. They shouldn't always be saying the same things, but as they get older and as they get wiser and as they get to know the Scriptures more, they should see even greater things to teach and inculcate to the people of God. Well, these are warnings. The House of Interpreter are a set of lessons and warnings to young Christians as they set out on the journey.

Now what are the seven things that Mercy and Christiana and the boys are shown?

Well, the first thing is one of Bunyan's greatest pictures, and it's one that I like to think about very often. It's the Man with a muckrake, and his head is always looking down into the muck. And above him there is one who is holding a crown of gold, but he doesn't see it. He's always looking down. All he can see is the muck. And Bunyan is saying through Interpreter to Christiana and Mercy, 'Every now and then, friends, we need to look up. We need to remember who we are. We need to remember the blessings that are ours in the gospel, that

'Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. But we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him even as He is.'

It's the lesson of gospel logic: Remember who you are in Jesus Christ.

The second thing that they see is a tidy and neat room. Now some of you ladies remember this is a wonderful illustration, given that these are two women, of course (no offense meant!) but ... [Ask my wife about her love of spiders afterwards!]...but a neat and tidy room. But there's a little spider in the room. And you know, ladies, if you see a spider what you do. Even if it's a marvelous room, for some of you, you don't want to be in that room. It will make you run out of the room. And even in the best of lives, even what may look glossy from the outside, there's always a little spider there, Bunyan is saying.

The third one I love very much. It's about a Chicken and her Brood. And Bunyan of course was in rural Bedford, and maybe while he was in prison could see and hear chickens and roosters, and thought about them often perhaps. And he talks about how chickens have different voices. Now, I'm not an expert on chickens, and I don't know whether there's an alarm call and whether there's a... I know a broody hen has a very distinctive clucking sound, so that when the little chicks... I do vividly remember on the farm when a chicken had just hatched her little chicks, and she would bring them out to show them off. And her feathers and wings were so spread, and she'd make that clucking sound. And she was sort of showing off her little ones, and if there was a dog or a cat nearby, the sound would sort of change.

Well, learn to know when God is warning you. Learn to know when God is rebuking you. Learn to know when God is saying something to encourage you. Learn to distinguish the voice of God, he seems to be saying.

Well, the fourth picture is the Butcher and the Sheep, and it's a startling image.

“And as a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so He opens not His mouth.”

It's an extraordinary thing about sheep. I remember on the farm shearing sheep with electric shearers, and cutting them. I was a child, and you know the clippers would slip. And sometimes in the folds of skin that you didn't realize was there underneath all that wool, and you'd nick them. There wouldn't be a bleat. There wouldn't be so much as a bleat out of them. It's an extraordinary thing about sheep.

And the lesson is, learn from sheep to face trouble without murmuring. What an extraordinary lesson right at the beginning of this journey! Learn to face suffering without murmuring. You want to take that from Bunyan, who spent twelve years in prison.

Well, there are other lessons... About a Garden full of flowers of different kinds, and they don't seem to quarrel with each other (the picture of a church); all kinds of people, and they should be able to get on with each other; a Field that is sown with wheat and corn and so on, but once the wheat and the corn are cut off, the

rest, the stubble is either burnt or trodden into the ground. What you want is the fruit; so bring forth fruit.

And then finally, a picture of a Robin. Now this is a British robin, not an American robin...they are two different kinds of birds. The British robin is a small little bird, but it's probably the most common bird in Britain, next to a sparrow. People love robins! You know Christmas cards always have little robins on a spade in the snow. And they're very sociable; they'll come to you in the garden, if you're nice. They'll come to you and they'll fly right up next to you. And they're beautiful creatures. They're fighters, though. They're very territorial. Worse than that, in this image, they eat worms! And of course these images are meant for the ladies. Bunyan is addressing some of these; and what may look glamorous and glitzy on the outside, behind the scenes you should see what they eat! And that's the picture.

And there are some proverbs that he gives them, and they are interesting proverbs: "One leak will destroy a ship, and one sin will destroy a sinner." And there's a whole slew of proverbs, and these are lessons—lessons that young believers, young Christians, need to learn.

And then that evening (and we'll close with this), they are filled with joy. And Mercy is having trouble going to sleep that night because she's so full of Christ and so full of the truth of the gospel. She's so full of the mercy of God.

Well, that's how the story begins. It's a journey, and the journey will now go to the Hill called Difficulty, and on the map you will see that's the next great location: the Hill called Difficulty on the other side of the Tomb, where in Part I Christian lost his burden. And for next week, the homework for next week is you're going to read ahead to the Hill called Difficulty.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You for these truths that Bunyan so graphically portrayed in allegorical fashion in the seventeenth century, but they reverberate within our hearts and minds because they are timeless truths. And we thank You for them, and pray that we too, as we make the journey toward the Celestial City might learn these truths, to bring forth fruit unto repentance. And we ask it 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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