

Pilgrim's Progress (6): The Palace Beautiful

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

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Now turn with me in the Scriptures first of all to the Book of Revelation, and to chapter twenty. The reason why we are reading this particular passage of Scripture this evening will become clear as we delve once again into the narrative of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

If I can just tempt you along just a little bit, you will remember, those of you who have been doing the reading ahead, there are two Lions chained outside of Palace Beautiful; and undoubtedly that was, in Bunyan's mind, an allusion in part to something that we read here in Revelation 20 with regard to Satan.

Now, there are some differences of opinion as to the interpretation of Revelation 20, but I understand Revelation 20 to be describing, by and large, events that are taking place now and have been from the time of Christ's ascension and through to His Second Coming. And the reference here in Revelation 20 to the chaining of the serpent is in part a reference to New Testament days, the last days, the days in which you and I live.

Before we read the passage — I'm going to read the first six verses of Revelation 20 — let's come before God in prayer.

Gracious God and ever blessed Father, as we bow in Your presence we acknowledge that without You we can do nothing. Come, Holy Spirit, and write Your words now upon our hearts, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy and inerrant word:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.

Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of

their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hands; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”

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

Now, if you're visiting with us here tonight and you haven't been with us in the past weeks, we are taking this summer to use Bunyan's famous *Pilgrim's Progress*, at one time in Christian households...in fact, for many centuries prior to this one perhaps, *Pilgrim's Progress* was next to the Bible to be found in every Christian home.

I've been delighted over the past weeks. Some of you have unearthed your own copy or the copy that belonged to your mother or grandmother, or aunt or uncle, and you've brought it to show me. If you haven't got a copy, let me commend this particular one: Oxford World's Classics: John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* and I understand they are available in our bookstore.

Now, we left Christian last week, you remember, having lost the Scroll that he had been given when he was back at the Sepulcher. You remember he had encountered three individuals, Simple, Sloth, and Presumption, whom he had left behind. And then you remember he came across two men who had jumped over the wall and joined him for a while. One was called Formalist and the other was called Hypocrisy. Eventually they took two roads, one called Danger and one called Destruction.

Christian, you remember, begins to ascend a hill, and half-way up the hill he stops at an Arbour. He begins to read the Scroll that had been given to him, and promptly falls asleep. He wakes up, you remember, in a start. There are two men running backwards. One is called Timorous; the other is called Mistrust, and they speak of terrible things, dangers which lie ahead. Christian goes forward, meets and encounters some of these dangers, and then realizes he has lost the Scroll. He has to go all the way back to the Arbour to find it again, and it's at this point now that we pick up the story this evening.

He retraces his steps, you remember, back to the Arbour. He picks up the Scroll (which last week, you remember, we interpreted as the assurance of salvation) and now returns to the hill. He ascends all the way to the top of the hill, and there he espies this marvelous house (palace), called Palace Beautiful, and he thinks it a good place to lodge for the night.

Now I want to pause there. I want to pause because we need to understand immediately the Palace Beautiful in Bunyan's allegory is the church. It's the visible church; it's the church of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi, if you like. It's the people of God who have collected and covenanted together to join under the leadership of officers and preachers and teachers who are united as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ to assemble on a weekly basis, morning and evening to hear the word of God; and mid-week for prayer, and to come on occasions to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and of Christian baptism.

And notice that for Bunyan it's a beautiful thing. I wondered as I was looking at this in the course of the week, I wonder if we were writing this allegory, I wonder how we would describe the Christian church, the visible church of Jesus Christ. And I wonder if the word *beautiful*, Palace Beautiful, would come into our minds. The Puritans, men like John Bunyan, thought a great deal. They were greatly exercised about the church: the church universal, the church invisible, but also the church visible. They wrote books about it, they preached long series of sermons about the church. They loved the church.

I think of the words of John Calvin in the sixteenth century. He was quoting Cyprian, one of the early church fathers, and saying in effect in his *magnum opus*, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that "we cannot have God as our Father unless we have the church as our mother." It probably grates on our ears a little bit, I suppose, when we first read that. It sounds a little Roman Catholic, perhaps, making more of the church than is want. It's instructive, I think, that for the Puritans the blessings of God, the blessings that God wants to give His children come via the church. In the main, to a large extent, those blessings come in the relationships that we forge together as the people of God, as brothers and sisters in the church of Jesus Christ. He describes the church as being this Palace Beautiful, as being built by the Lord of the Hill, and He built it for the relief and security of pilgrims...for the relief and security of pilgrims.

Now let's pick up the story again. And it's interesting to note that Faithful never came to Palace Beautiful. Faithful, you remember, was martyred. He was killed back in the town called Vanity. Bunyan is trying to tell us that you can be a Christian just like the dying thief on the cross, that you can go to heaven, you can go into the presence of Jesus and never formally attach yourself to the visible church; but the norm for every believer, every child of God, is that they attach themselves, they become members of the visible church of Jesus Christ. Now I want us to see three things as we enter into Palace Beautiful, and the first is this:

I. That the church can expect satanic resistance.

The church can expect satanic resistance. Before Christian enters into Palace

Beautiful, he spies two Lions. Now, the Lions are tethered, they're chained, but Christian cannot see the chains. All he can see are the Lions. Perhaps he can hear the Lions; perhaps he can hear them roaring, even as he approaches. And you can imagine the sweat breaking out upon his brow, the heart beginning to pace a little, the breathing becoming short and deliberate. And from the door of Palace Beautiful, a Porter cries out to Christian;

"Is thy strength so small? Fear not the Lions, for they are chained, and are placed there for Trial of Faith, where it is, and for Discovery of those that have none: Keep in the midst of the Path, and no hurt shall come unto thee."

You know, there's a wealth of pastoral teaching just in that little—well, it's a fairly long—sentence, but a wealth of pastoral teaching. These Lions do two things: they warn the unconverted, but they also try the faith of those who are genuinely in union with Jesus Christ. They test our faith. They're one of those rites of passage through which we must, all of us who are believers who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we must all be exercised by these things, and as a consequence grow in grace and become the stronger for it. The advice is to "keep in the midst of the path." If you stray to the edges of the path you can be sure that the Lions, even though they are tethered, may well be enabled to bite you. Keep to the center of the path.

I almost feel as though that's going to ring, perhaps, in our ears now in the next few hours, and perhaps in the next few days, as we encounter in the providence of God trials and testings: "Keep to the middle of the path."

Now, interpreters have had fun with these two Lions, trying to interpret the allegory. Sometimes you can over-interpret Bunyan, and it may be in the case of the two Lions some over-interpretation has taken place. Some have conjectured that the two Lions are the state and the church. And for Bunyan, you understand, in the middle of the seventeenth century, imprisoned as he was on three separate occasions...on two occasions for upwards of six years at a time; he was in prison for over twelve years...he was imprisoned not just by the forces of the state, but also by the forces of the church of the state, namely the Church of England, the Anglican Church. And interpreters, and particularly those who are not Anglican interpreters, have interpreted one of the Lions as the Anglican Church of the seventeenth century.

But I think we can take that in a more general way. It's part of that vision that we've just read in Revelation 20, that in the thousand-year reign...and let's, for the sake of argument, understand that interpretation as being the period of time, the interval of time from the ascension of Jesus until His Second Coming, that period of time in which you and I live...and in that period of time, Satan is on a chain. He can do nothing apart from the permissive decree of Almighty God.

Now, we see that so very clearly, don't we, in the opening chapters of the Book of

Job: that it is at the behest of God that Satan is told, “Have you considered My servant Job?” There are certain limits, and beyond those limits Satan cannot go. In the first test, he may test all that Job has, but he's not allowed to lay so much as a finger on Job himself. In the second test, he is allowed to touch Job, but he is not allowed to destroy him. Satan is on a chain. He is like a roaring lion, and, ‘Christian,’ Bunyan is saying, ‘you need to wake up. You need to realize that as you make your way, your pilgrimage through this life, Satan will indeed roar. But understand, at every point of the way he is tethered.’

As Luther puts it so wonderfully,

And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His [truth to] triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim: we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for, lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.

The church, then, can expect satanic resistance.

II. The church is gifted by overseers.

The second thing that we see is that the church is gifted by overseers. The Porter is the church's overseer. Probably Bunyan was thinking of the minister of the church in Bedford, with whom he had such a warm and close relationship, a man by the name of John Gifford. And he asks Christian several pertinent questions. He asks, “What is your name?” and Christian tells him that his name is Christian, but that it had formerly been — and this is the point at which we learn his former name; he's always been Christian in the allegory — but his former name was Graceless.

We had a three-point sermon on grace this morning. We heard all about grace, and here is Bunyan's allegory telling us that apart from conversion, apart from faith in Jesus Christ, apart from that experiential relationship that brings us into union and communion with Christ, our name is Graceless. “I came,” he said, “of the race of Japheth, whom God will persuade to dwell in the tents of Shem.”

Now that may not mean a whole lot to us. You know they say about Bunyan...Spurgeon said about Bunyan, that “if you pricked him anywhere, his blood would be bibline!” A Bible text would flow along with the blood platelets from his veins. And Bunyan is referring to Genesis 9 and a little later to Genesis 11: the blessings and curses of Noah upon his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and saying of Japheth (who eventually became the Gentiles) that they will take refuge beneath the tents of Shem, namely the Semites, namely the Jews.

Well, that's probably all of us! I'm not absolutely sure, but it's probable all of us here tonight are Gentiles. And what Bunyan is saying is that we have come to take refuge in the promises that were given to Shem. And the promises...from Shem, you remember, comes Abraham, and from Abraham the line of descent all the way down through the Old Testament, so that Paul can say in Galatians, "By faith in Jesus Christ we are the children of Abraham." We are the Japhethites who have come to take refuge in the tents of Shem. Do you see how much Bunyan knew his Bible? He's able just to throw off that little text from Genesis 9, and make it so very pertinent and meaningful as to what a Christian actually is.

Well, the second question that the Porter asks him is, "How is it that you have come so late?" And again, I think Bunyan is teaching us something very pastoral, because the reason for his lateness, you remember, is because he had fallen asleep in the Arbour, had lost the Scroll; he had to go all the way back, and I think Bunyan is saying that lateness has not only cost you something, but it's also cost us something; because we have missed your fellowship, we have missed your company; we have missed the support and rapport, by your absence.

I remember hearing...I only heard Dr. Lloyd-Jones preach in the flesh five or six times, and three of those occasions were on the same text, Psalm 8. It was one of his traveling sermons. I think he preached it many hundreds of times. It just got better and better and better each time he preached it. But I remember him saying in that gravelly voice of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (which I think Ligon can probably impersonate, but I can't!) that one of the consequences of being absent from the house of God when the word of God is being preached and the sacraments are being disseminated is that you miss...you might miss...the Lord's blessing! He might come down! He might come down in great power and blessing, and you won't be there! And you will have missed that blessing.

Bunyan has Porter, then, ask him, "How is it that you've come so late?"

III. The church provides spiritual refreshment.

The third thing that we learn from this allegory is that the church provides spiritual refreshment...the church provides spiritual refreshment. The Puritans called the Lord's Day "the market day of the soul," and I suppose the church is the equivalent to the Starbucks of our day. It's where you stop for a while, and you take some refreshment. And you feed your souls, and you are nourished thereby.

Now the first thing that happens is that Porter calls for one of the Virgins. He describes her as a "very grave and beautiful damsel, named Discretion." And she comes to examine him according to the rules of the House. There's that Puritan thing again. There's that Bunyan-esque thing again. It's one thing for you to say that you're a Christian, but it's another thing for your life to live up to that profession. So in order for you to be able to get entrance to Palace Beautiful, to

membership in the visible church, you have to be examined according to the rules of the House, and then you can join the rest of the Family, she says.

Well, he passes this examination and he's brought to meet three more women: Prudence, Piety, and Charity...Prudence, Piety, and Charity. Now at this point the three women engage in conversation with Christian, and three things come to the surface.

The first is spiritual conversation. It's Piety, and she asks him to explain the motivations that led him to take up the pilgrim's way. His answer is very instructive. On the one hand, it was the fear of destruction; and then it was, as God would have it, it was partly his fear of destruction, but partly, too, he senses it was the providence of God. It was the work of God in his soul.

Now, to be sure, from a literary point of view Bunyan is doing something here to remind you of the story, because at this point Christian now rehearses the whole story again, and retells the story, and it's—you know, it's useful if you've laid down the story for a while and you pick it up, you have one of these literary devices where the whole story is summarized in a couple of paragraphs. But that's not Bunyan's great concern. He was not some great literary figure. His concern is much more pastoral, and what he's saying is it's a very good thing to talk about the way God brought you to Jesus Christ; that's it's a very good thing when two or three of you gather together, and you sit down and one says to the other, 'Tell me, how did you become a Christian? Rehearse the story.' Some of you will go back to the days of your infancy, and you'll say, 'I never knew a moment when I didn't trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.' Others of you will speak about a moment when you knelt at the edge of your bed, perhaps in the presence of your mother or grandmother, and you prayed a little prayer, a little child-like prayer, and God gave you assurance that you'd passed from darkness to light.

My own story is one of a college freshman at eighteen years of age, from one who was very antagonistic to all things religious and Christian, to becoming all of a sudden—I can give you a day and an hour, and possibly if I stretch it a little, almost to a minute—when I sensed the Holy Spirit coming into my life and drawing me into faith and union with Jesus Christ. Our stories are going to be different. What's important is that we are trusting in Jesus Christ, and that we have a story to tell: not simply the story of Jesus' dying on the cross, but the story of how I became interested in the story of Jesus' dying on the cross. And I think that's what Bunyan is doing in this allegory. Talk about your relationship to Jesus Christ.

Then Prudence asks about the City that he'd left behind, and the struggles that he now faces with things that he thought he had left behind, but realizes every now and then that he's brought along with him. "And what is it that makes you so desirous to go to Mount Zion?" And Christian replies,

“Why, there I hope to see him alive that did hang dead on the Cross; and there I hope to be rid of all those things, that to this day are in me and an Annoyance to me: There they say there is no Death, and there I shall dwell with such Company as I like best. For, to tell you truth, I love him, because I was by him eased of my Burden; and I am weary of my inward Sickness: I would fain be where I shall die no more, and with the Company that shall continually cry, *Holy, Holy, Holy.*”

And then Charity asks him why he hasn't brought with him his wife and his children, and to which Christian says that his wife was afraid of losing this world, and that his children were given to the foolish delights of youth.

We have also described not only these spiritual conversations, but we're also introduced to the fact that Christian now has a Supper, a marvelous Supper, and followed by a rest in a bed called Peace. I don't know about you [but] I can resonate with that! There's nothing like your own bed! You can go to all the hotels in the world, but there's nothing like your own bed. It may be an old bed, it may have its idiosyncrasies, but it's your bed, and it fits your body, and it's that moment...it's the best moment of the day, when you get into bed and you're at peace, when there are no worries and no concerns, and you can just sense that soporific sleep coming and overtaking you. And it's that image that Bunyan is painting. He has this wonderful Supper, and he goes to sleep in this bed called Peace.

And then he's introduced to rare treasures. He's taken to a room and shown all kinds of things: the rod of Moses — you know, the rod that he threw down before Pharaoh and it became a snake; he's shown the Trumpets of Gideon's men; he's shown Jael's hammer — you know, the tent peg that killed Cicera; Shamgar's ox-goad — probably a pole of some kind, maybe as long as ten feet long, with which, you remember, he slew many hundreds of Philistines; David's sling; and the Lord's Sword with which he will kill the Man of Sin.

Well, we pass the Man of Sin by. It's a seventeenth century thing. It was probably a reference to the Pope in the seventeenth century, but we'll pass all that by for now. But I want us to see how in Bunyan's mind he's shown all these things in order, I think, to convince him of the reality of Christian history, of Bible history. These things are true. These are not fantasies, but these things are actually true, they actually happened - the story that led to the coming of Jesus, down through the pages of the Old Testament, and the story that eventually, however we interpret it, leads to the destruction of the man of sin, the son of perdition—all of this is true.

And he's especially shown the family history of the Lord of the Hill, he who was the Son of the Ancient of Days, and came by that eternal generation, the only begotten Son of God. He's shown his lineage: all the papers, all the documents, all those important signed and sealed documents that prove who Jesus is, and what He did, and the significance of all that He accomplished as our sin bearer

and substitute. And Christian is greatly encouraged by all these things: greatly encouraged by this spiritual conversation, by the food and the rest, and seeing all of these rare treasures.

You know, that's what a Sunday is like. I sat over there this morning listening to Ligon preach from Ephesians chapter one, being reminded of the spiritual blessings that are mine in Jesus Christ. It was a rare, rare treat of God bestowing His weekly—yes, His weekly—blessings upon us as the children of God.

Well, having been encouraged by all of this, he says, “Then I saw in my dream, That on the morrow he got up to go forwards, but they desired him to stay till the next day also; and then said they, we will (if the day be clear) show you the Delectable Mountains; which, they said, would yet farther add to his Comfort....” So he consented and stayed, and “When the morning was up, they had him to the top of the House, and bid him look South: So he did [the Delectable Mountains are in the South]; and behold, at a great Distance, he saw a most pleasant mountainous Country, beautified with Woods, Vineyards, Fruits of all sorts, Flowers also, with Springs and Fountains, very delectable to behold. Then he asked the name of the Country. And they said, It was *Emmanuel's Land....*” And from Palace Beautiful, that is, from the church, sometimes on a clear day you can get a glimpse of Emmanuel's Land; and oh! how ravishing a sight that is!

May God bless this to our own souls, for His name's sake. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You once again for this allegory of John Bunyan as he takes us into the Scriptures, the word of God. Bless it to us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand; 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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