

## **Pilgrim's Progress (12) – Crossing the River**

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Now turn with me, if you would, to Revelation, chapter 22. We come this evening to the end of our summer journey that has taken us through the first part of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* — probably the only part of *Pilgrim's Progress* most of us have read.

We began when we encountered Christian in his home village, bowed down beneath an enormous burden that he was carrying on his back, and a book within his hand. And you remember that he encounters Evangelist, who bids him go in the direction of the Wicket Gate and eventually to the Cross, where he loses his Burden. His journey has been an arduous and difficult one, and there are a few more difficulties ahead for him and his latest companion, namely Hopeful.

Last time, we left Christian and Hopeful on the top of those Delectable Mountains, and they were on a Ridge, you remember, called Clear, and with the aid of what Bunyan calls a “perspective glass” they see something like the Gate, and something also of the Glory of the place.

Well, before they get to that Gate there's a River, but before they get to the River there are a number of things that they have to traverse, one of which is Enchanted Ground. And then that respite in the journey, that wonderful place called Beulah Land, where they seem at least for a short season to be free from trials and difficulties. They meet there a Gardener who tells them about the Glory that is yet ahead of them, and then, eventually, they come to the River.

Now the description of the River is a very beautiful one...it's a very moving one. Christian and Hopeful come before this River — there's no bridge over it. The only way to cross this River is to go through it, or else they can't arrive at the Gate. And they ask if anyone at all has ever made it to the Gate apart from crossing this River, and they are told that two men only have made it apart from crossing this River, and they are of course Enoch and Elijah.

And then the Pilgrims, especially Christian, begin to despair, and they ask if the River is the same depth throughout. And they're told, no, it isn't. But they're not given any further help on this matter... “For you shall find it deeper or shallower,

as you believe in the King of the Place.”

And Christian then enters the Water and begins, you remember, to sink. He cries out to Hopeful, “I’m sinking in deep Waters; the Breakers go over my head” — an allusion, of course, to one of the Psalms — “All the Waves go over me....” And Hopeful responds, “Be of good cheer, my Brother. I feel the bottom, and it is good.”

And Hopeful's encouragement doesn't help Christian, as he is overcome with a great darkness and horror. He's afraid he will die in the River and never enter the Gate. He doesn't remember now the events of the pilgrimage and has troublesome thoughts once again about the sins that he has committed in his life. Hopeful holds Christian's head above the water, and with enormous difficulty and much endeavor to comfort him, telling him that he can see the Gate, and there are people there ready to welcome them. And eventually Christian cries out with a loud voice, “Oh, I see Him again! and He tells me, ‘When you pass through the Waters, I will be with you. And when you pass through the Rivers, they will not sweep over you.’ And they both take courage and soon find solid ground to stand on, and the rest of the River is shallow.

And on the other side there are two Shining Ones — angels, messengers of God to help them, waiting there for these Pilgrims. They admit their role in waiting: “We are Ministering Spirits sent to serve those who will inherit Salvation.” And they tell the Pilgrims that when they arrive at the Gate they will be given white robes, and every day “your walk and talk shall be with the King, even all the days of Eternity. You will not see there again such things as you saw when you were in the lower region upon the earth, that is, Sorrow, Sickness, Affliction, and Death, for the old order of things has passed away.”

And as they draw near to the Gate, a company of the Heavenly Host come out to greet them, and the Pilgrims are introduced by the two Shining Ones, so the Heavenly Host cry out, “Blessed are those who are invited to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.” And a King's Trumpeter sounds and comes out to meet them, and everyone travels together, shouting and rejoicing and with much salutation and the noise of Trumpets.

And they eventually reach the Gate, and above the Gates are written, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have right to the Tree of Life, and may go through the Gates into the City.” And the Pilgrims present their Certificates, and the Certificates are taken to the King, who orders that the Gates be opened, that the Righteous may enter. And in they go, and as they enter they are transfigured, and they're given new robes to wear, and they break out into praise, singing with a loud voice, “To Him who sits on the Throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever. Amen.”

Well, let's read at least a part of where Bunyan caught that marvelous vision in

the tale of *Pilgrim's Progress* in Revelation 22, but before we read it together, let's pray.

*Our Father, our hearts are filled with joy as we think of the glimpse of glory that You give to Your children. We thank You from the very depths of our hearts for this marvelous passage of Scripture that closes our Bibles. We pray now for the help of Your Spirit, that we might once again read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Hear now the word of God.

“And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bondservants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever.

“And he said to me, ‘These words are faithful and true’; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place. ‘And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.’

“And I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. And he said to me, ‘Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book: worship God.’

“And he said to me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and let the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and let the one who is holy, still keep himself holy. Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with me to render to every man according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

“‘I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.’

“And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

“I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.”

Now the final chapters of *Pilgrim's Progress* delineate for us, of course, the death of Christian and Hopeful, and ours is not an age that thinks about death very much. We've sanitized it. We've put curtains around it. It's not unusual these days for us to be well into our twenties and thirties, and sometimes even into our forties before we ever view a dead body. And in Bunyan's time that was not the case. In the seventeenth century when Bunyan was writing *Pilgrim's Progress* death was a very considerable reality. Infant mortality, disease and plagues....For the men and women of faith of Bunyan's era, death was viewed as a date in Jesus' diary to be reckoned with, to be thought about, to be lived by. For believers, death is the gate of life, and this world merely a preparation for the world to come.

There are many reasons, I suppose, why we don't think of death in quite the same way, and why Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a means of shifting and altering and changing our worldview about death. This is an age of affluence. We are amongst the most affluent people the world has ever known, and there's no getting away from that, that in all of our affluence, in all of our acquisition of things, in all of our material acquisitions we lose sight of what the real part of life is: to prepare us for the life to come. There are many Christians in the world tonight who live with the prospect of death right before them - many Christians, for example, in Africa who live with AIDS as a very considerable reality and who see death on a daily basis.

You and I, we have perhaps generated the view that talk about heaven is escapism — it's pie in the sky, and what Jesus wants us to do is to live in this world. And there's a truth to that: we ought to live in this world; we're to conquer this world for Christ. We've lost sight of what C.S. Lewis talks about (building, I suppose, on Augustine) that all of the instinct within us that cannot find fulfillment in this world is God's signature within that here we have no continuing city, that we seek one which is to come. But until we find that rest which alone is to be found in Jesus, and that rest which alone finds its culmination in heaven, this

world is always a restless place.

I think Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and particularly these closing, moving chapters as he describes how Hopeful and Christian must cross the River of Death to enter the Gates of the Celestial City are very appropriate to us today.

Richard Baxter wrote a hymn,

*Lord, It Belongs Not to My Care*  
Whether I die or live;  
To love and serve Thee is my share,  
And this Thy grace must give.  
If life be long, I will be glad  
That I may long obey;  
If short, yet why should I be sad  
To welcome endless day?  
Christ leads me through no darker rooms  
Than He went through before.  
He that unto God's kingdom comes  
Must enter by this door.

## **I. Death is a reality for everyone.**

We need to learn, you and I, to swim against the tide and to think about death, and to reckon with death, and to be prepared for death. I want us in the first place to underline that point, because that's the first thing that Bunyan seems to be doing in *Pilgrim's Progress*, telling us that the message of the Bible from beginning to end is a message that tells us in its opening chapters that death is an unnatural thing: it's the consequence of sin, it's the curse that has come into the world, and that God, by His redeeming grace in Jesus Christ, has found the solution to that predicament, the rending asunder of body and soul, through the coming of His Son to die on our behalf so that the story of the Scriptures is one of God's fulfilling of His great plan to rescue us from our plight and to restore us to what it ought to be in glorified bodies and spirits in a new heaven and a new earth.

## **II. Christians should not be afraid to speak about death.**

The next thing that this tale of Bunyan's does for us is to remind us very forcibly of the fact and the reality of death, and as Christians we oughtn't be afraid to speak about death. In fact, it ought to be commonplace amongst us, because our forefathers, our forebears in generations past, often found themselves not only talking about death, but talking about the victory and the triumph that Jesus has accomplished over death, so that we can face it as those who are in union and

communion with Jesus Christ. But Bunyan, in the second place, not only talks to us about the fact and the reality of death in his closing chapters, but he talks to us, too, about the struggle of death. It's quite surprising.

Now you might have expected somebody like John Bunyan, a man of considerable assurance of his own personal faith, that he would have described the death of Christian in very triumphant ways. I'm often surprised just how badly Christian dies. As he steps into the River, he's filled with despair. He sinks down into the Water. If it wasn't for Hopeful holding his head above the Water, he was on his way down into that Water. He cannot feel the bottom — forgets all of the providences of God and the promises of God that he had been given. And death is often a struggle, even for some of the choicest saints of God.

My predecessor in the church that I served for 18 years in Belfast...a man that I respect and admire enormously, one of the great leaders of the Christian church (at least in its Presbyterian form) in Britain throughout the middle of the twentieth century...and yet, in his death was savagely attacked by Satan, having lost all of his assurance. I remember visiting him at one moment — and it's a memory I don't even want to share with you — it's a painful memory of this gracious, godly man — and the only thing that I can say to account for it, it was an attack of Satan just before he crossed the River. Sometimes it's weakness of faith; sometimes it's the onslaught of the wicked one; sometimes it's physical and psychological weakness that goes hand in hand with the trial and the struggle that some experience in death.

Not everyone dies like Mr. Valiant-for-Truth in Part II of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: “After this it was noised abroad that Mr. Valiant-for-Truth was taken with a summons by the same post as the other; and had this for a token that the summons was true, that his pitcher was broken at the fountain. When he understood it, he called for his friends, and told them of it. Then, said he, I am going to my Father's, and tho' with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My Sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my Pilgrimage, and my Courage and Skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought His battles, who now will be my Rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the River-side, into which as he went, he said, ‘Death, where is thy Sting?’ And as he went, down deeper, he said, ‘Grave, where is thy Victory?’ So he passed over, and all the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side.”

Now, that's not the way Christian dies. There is a fear of death for Christian, and it's something that the Book of Hebrews alludes to in the second chapter, you remember, speaking of Satan who cajoles and teases that instinctive fear of death that lies within the natural Adamic heart. And remember what the Book of Hebrews does in the second chapter, namely, remind us of what Christ actually came to do: that He came in our flesh, that He came in our weakness, that He

bore our humanity, He became temptable and suffered and died, and He became thereby the Pioneer, the One who goes before us and blazes a trail even through death, even through the River, that we may be able to say even in the very depths of the River, 'My Savior has passed this way before me.' The Book of Hebrews, you remember, goes on to say of Jesus Christ that He has conquered him who holds the power of death, namely the devil.

Now, the devil doesn't really hold that power, but he thinks that he does, and he can convince Christians that he does, and that's why the second chapter of Hebrews is reminding us to look to Jesus Christ on the cross achieve that glorious victory over death that enables us to say with Mr. Valiant-for-Truth, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

Many a Christian, just like Christian in Bunyan's tale, can for a moment be convinced by Satan of lies with regard to death.

### **III. How Christians should prepare themselves for death.**

But then, in the third place, not only does Bunyan tell us about the fact of death and the victory that Jesus has gained over death, but principally that we ought to prepare for death...to prepare for death. There's a wonderful story of an event that took place around about the same time as Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Thomas Goodwin was the President of Magdalene College at Oxford, and he was interviewing a prospective student in a darkened office. And the first question that he put to the student was, "Are you ready to die?"... and the student fled in horror as to what was about to occur! But it was a typical question of the seventeenth century. If the story is true, and it's often repeated, it was typical of how they lived their lives, that the president of a college at Oxford should ask that very question of a student, a young man - and at that time he was probably no more than 13, 14, or 15 years of age — "Are you ready to die? Are you ready to meet your Maker? Are you ready to pass through that River? Do you have any certainty and assurance as to what lies on the other side of that River?"

Bunyan in another treatise once wrote, "Consider, thou must die but once. I mean as to this world, for if when thou goest hence dost not die well, thou canst not come back and die better." Do you see what he's saying? And that may well be the reason why he portrays Christian in this light, as a kind of spur to you and me that we would indeed prepare ourselves for our death day.

It involves at least three principles, I think. First of all, it involves estimating everything — everything — our values, our priorities, our possessions, our relationships, our tasks — as these things will appear when you actually come to die. These things that are so important to you now, how important will they be when you come to die? Thomas Ken, the hymn writer, uttered those famous words: "Live each day as if thy last."

You remember the story of John Wesley, when on horseback stopped by someone who puts to him this question as he's traveling hither and yon preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in various towns and villages as was his wont, "What would you do if you knew you would die within 24 hours?" And apparently he went into his saddlebag and brought out his diary to see what he was doing tomorrow, and he said, "Precisely what is written here." Living each day as if your last...estimating everything, evaluating all that we do in the light of how significant and how important they will be on our death day.

And then, another principle, I think: that you and I ought to dwell and meditate on heaven as a daily spiritual exercise at least once a day, at least for a few minutes every day, to deliberately ponder the life that is to come; to think about the golden streets of Jerusalem, to think about that robe of righteousness that we will be given; to think about the transformed soul and reunited body after the intermediate state is over with and Jesus has come again, and our bodies have been raised from the dead to be reunited with our souls, and we can walk and talk in the streets of that Jerusalem — so that crossing the River, yes! Actually to be anticipated!

You remember the wonderful account of Stonewall Jackson. On Sunday, May 10, in 1863, Confederate Lt. Gen. Thomas Jonathan Jackson passed from this earth, a devoutly religious man. When notified that he had not long to live, Jackson replied, "It is the Lord's Day. My wish is fulfilled. I've always desired to die on a Sunday." Capt. James Power Smith, who all night long kept his General warmly wrapped and undisturbed in his sleep, would later write:

"And here, against our hopes, notwithstanding the skill and care of wise and watchful surgeons, attended day and night by his wife and friends, and the prayers and tears of all the Southern land, thinking not of himself but of the cause he loved and for the troops who had followed him so well and given him so great a name, our chief sank day by day with symptoms of pneumonia and some pains of pleurisy until 3:15 p.m., in the quiet of a Sabbath afternoon, May 10, 1863, he raised himself from his bed saying, "No! No! Let us pass over the river and rest under the shade of the trees." And falling again to his pillow, he passed away over the river, where, in a land where warfare is not known or feared, he rests forever under the trees."

Well, that's a beautiful description. It's eloquent in the way that it's written. It's moving to you Southerners, especially, but it's typical of how our forebears regarded death and described it in such beautiful terms.

There's one more little thing, because that's not the way *Pilgrim's Progress, Part I* ends. It ends in a very shocking, shocking way, because just as Christian and Hopeful are making their way up to the Gate, they turn around and who do they see emerging out of the River but Ignorance. And as soon as Ignorance emerges



out of the River, he is taken to a Door in the side of the Hill, a Door that leads straight to the City of Destruction. It's a very, very startling thing at the end of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, that not everybody who crosses that River of Death goes into the Gates of the Celestial City, but only those who have a Certificate; and that there is a road that leads straight to Hell, even from just outside the Gates of that City. And you see what Bunyan is saying? Make sure that you have that Certificate. Make sure that you're building your life on the solid rock of Jesus Christ and saying, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling."

Well, that's basically Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress, Part I*. I trust I've at least sown a little seed in your minds for a love of this great, great volume, and so let's come now before God in prayer.

*Our gracious God and ever-blessed Father, as we come to the close of another Lord's Day — and we do not know how many more Lord's Days You will grant us before You call us into Your nearer presence — we've been in situations like this before, where on the next Lord's Day there is someone missing from our company. And we pray tonight that every single soul in this room might know and have an assurance of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Give us, we pray, the grace of perseverance even to the end, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, and bless us and encourage us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

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