

Pilgrim's Progress: Christiana's Story (7) – The Celestial City

Revelation 22:1-5

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December 5, 2007

Now if you have your Bibles with you, turn with me to the final chapter of the book of Revelation, Revelation 22; and in a moment or two we're going to read the opening verses.

We come tonight to what is the final session in our study of Part II of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the story of Christiana (the wife of Christian), and the four sons. And as we've discovered in the last couple of weeks, all four of the sons are now married. We are following their journey along the same path and in some of the same locations as we are very familiar with from Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Tonight we come — and if you have the map that was handed out right at the very beginning...if you don't, don't worry about it...but if you do have the map we are in the third column of the map, right over on the right hand side, and tonight we pick it up in Enchanted Ground. That's where we are, and we'll be going through Beulah Land, from which one can view the Celestial City; and then, the River of Death that has to be crossed into the Celestial City itself.

This section, just as Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress* ends so beautifully and movingly as Bunyan describes the death of Christian, tonight we have a number of deaths. We'll see the death of Christiana and Mr. Valiant-for-truth, and Great-heart, and Mr. Honest, and Mr. Despondency and a few others. All of them will one after another receive notification that the day has come for them to cross the River and into the Celestial City.

Now, before we get to the Celestial City and the crossing of the River, we need to pause a little in Enchanted Ground, because there we come across a particular character, a Mr. Stand-fast, we want to see and address and learn from. Before we do any of that, we want to read from Revelation 22, and I'm going to be reading the first five verses of Revelation 22.

Now before we read the passage together, let's look to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You for the Bible in our hands in a language we can understand, in translations that help us understand it even better. We would long, O Lord, to be men and women of one Book, to be men and women who love the Scriptures, who love Your word, who take up that "right Jerusalem blade" and wield it on behalf of the Savior. We pray as we encounter in our own experience the wiles of the wicked one, the devil, that we might be prepared, having put on the whole armor of God that we might be able to stand in the evil day. Now bless us as we read Your word together. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Revelation 22:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

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

Now, as in Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress* the group come to a place near the end of their journey that is a place of especial difficulty for Christians. It's one of Bunyan's great lessons. It's what he sees in the Bible: that the Christian life is a pilgrimage all the way to heaven, and that very often even at the journey's end there are special temptations and special pitfalls for those who have been believers for decades and decades, even for the most godly and mature of believers. We must persevere, even to the end. It's a lesson that Bunyan sees as part of the message of the New Testament — that we can never stop. We can never relax for one minute. We must always be ready to do battle with the evil one, right up to the point of death itself.

They come to this place called Enchanted Ground. It's a dark place. Mist falls. The path is boggy, and the bushes seem to reach out and grab them. And they have to call to one another, because they can't see each other. They have to walk by faith and not by sight. And there are a couple of resting places, harbours, one of which is described as The Slothful's Friend. It's a place that promises much refreshment for Christians, and Bunyan says that if they hadn't got what he calls "the map" — it's a metaphor for the Scriptures, for the Bible, because the Bible shows us the way, it guides us along life's path — if it hadn't been for the map, they would have got stuck in the bog, in the muddy ground.

There's another harbour, and they see two characters, one called Heedless, and one called Too-bold, and they're fast asleep. They've given up. You see, they're not awake. They're not prepared to meet the evil one, and when some of the pilgrims shake these two, Heedless and Too-bold, they begin to speak, but they're still asleep. They're speaking in their sleep, and their speech makes no sense. It neither has "Faith nor Reason," Bunyan says. It's a warning that even those who have made the journey this far can leave off and fail to persevere, and it's the warning of Scripture that is Bunyan's important lesson here: that he that perseveres even to the end shall be saved.

Well, they come now to another character, a great character, a man by the name of Mr. Standfast. And Mr. Standfast is introduced to us as a man who is upon his knees with his hands and eyes lifted up. And he has encountered a woman. Now, I've been in two minds whether to employ Bunyan's description of her, and I will, but they're Bunyan's words. He describes her as a "bold and impudent slut." Now I think in the seventeenth century the word may have had slightly different connotations perhaps to connotations that we have today, so excuse me for using that word. It's Bunyan's word, however.

She is a depiction of worldliness. She's called Madam Bubble. Alexander Whyte, who wrote a couple of volumes on all of the characters in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, both Part I and Part II, preached these lectures that became sort of sermons, and he has a very famous one on Madame Bubble. She's described as having "pleasant attire, but old." She's been around for a while, and she presented herself to Mr. Standfast and offered him three things. She offered him "her body, her purse, and her bed." There's a lengthy description of her that Bunyan gives us:

She will talk with any man. She always laughs poor Pilgrims to scorn, but highly commends the rich. If there be one cunning to get Money in a place, she will speak well of him from house to house. She loves banqueting and feasting mainly well. She's always at one full table or another. She has given it out in some places that she is a Goddess, and therefore some do Worship her. She has her times, and open places of feasting; and she will say, and avow it, that none can show a food comparable to hers. She promises to dwell with children's children, if they will but love and make much of her. She will cast out of her purse gold, like dust, in some places, and to some persons. She loves to be sought after, spoken well of....

And so on...the description goes on. It's a description of worldliness and the enticement, the allurements, of worldliness. It's Bunyan giving expression to the Apostle John's description of "the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life." She's a witch who practices sorcery. She has a throne and a court. She loves to feast and party. She likes the best and is never satisfied.

She's called Madame Bubble, because for all of her pretensions and all of her gaudiness and all of her enticements, she's just a bubble that is so easily burst.

But Bunyan gives a very strong warning — a warning that there are some who are particularly enticed by Madame Bubble, and he warns especially of relationships between parents and children. Bunyan has already described Matthew, one of the boys...you remember when they came within the walls of salvation there was a fenced garden, and there were trees belonging to Beelzebub's land that came over the wall. And Matthew, you remember, took some of that fruit, and much later became ill almost to the point of death. And you remember how Christiana, the mother, employs the help of a physician and has these pills, these tablets. And she orders twelve boxes of them because she knew the attraction of the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh and the pride of life. Children in Bunyan's time and children in our time are dedicated followers of fashion. They are followers of Madame Bubble, of whom I think the Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, "Vanity." That's what she is...that life under the sun is just vanity. Well, Bunyan's warning then about worldliness.

And then they move from Enchanted Ground to Beulah Land. Beulah Land is just on the doorsteps of Heaven. You can see the Celestial City from Beulah Land. It's described as a place where the sun shines night and day. They can be refreshed without sleeping, "for the bells so ring, and the trumpets common sound so melodiously...."

A letter comes when they're in Beulah Land. It comes in the post [in what you would call the mail], and it comes for Christiana. It's come from the other side of the River. It's come to say to Christiana that it's time for her to cross the River:

"...The Master calleth for thee, and expecteth that thou shouldest stand in his Presence, in clothes of Immortality, within these ten days."

She offers blessings to her children, says goodbye to her friends...to Mr. Great-heart, to Mr. Valiant-for-truth, to Mr. Honest and the rest.

Now the day drew on, that Christiana must be gone. So the Road was full of people, to see her take her Journey. But behold all the banks beyond the River were full of horses and chariots, which were come down from above to accompany her to the City Gate. So she came forth, and entered the River, with a beckon of farewell, to those that followed her.... The last words that she was heard to say were, "I come, Lord, to be with thee, and bless thee."

So her children and friends returned to their place, for those that waited for Christiana had carried her out of their sight. So she went and called, and entered in at the Gate with all the ceremonies of Joy, that her husband Christian had done before her.

At her departure her children wept, but Mr. Great-heart and Mr. Valiant play'd upon their well-tuned cymbal and harp for Joy. So all departed to their respective places.

Then this postman comes again, and this time for Mr. Ready-to-halt. Now you remember that Mr. Ready-to-halt is on crutches. You remember at the time of the dance he “danced with one of his crutches,” as Bunyan described. Well, now he bequeaths his crutches to his son, because he has no need of them where he is going.

And it comes time for Mr. Despondency to go, and he has a very solemn and a very telling word. Mr. Despondency and his daughter are always ...despondent! They suffer from what the Puritans would have called a “spiritual melancholy.” “Ghosts,” Mr. Despondency calls them. He warns his friends that as he and his daughter are about to cross the River these ghosts will seek others to occupy, and you must shut your doors to them.

It's very moving, I think. Bunyan, you see, has among the characters that cross the River and into the Celestial City those who seemingly are always doubting their salvation, who are always looking down rather than looking up. That's why I've said in these studies how much I love the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress* because it's a story about weak Christians and failing Christians.

Myself and my daughter, you know what we have been, and how troublesomely we have behaved ourselves in every company. My will, and my daughter's is, that our Desponds and slavish fears be by no man ever received, from the day of our departure, forever: For I know, that after my death, they will offer themselves to others. For, to be plain with you, they are ghosts, to be entertained, which we entertained when we first began to be Pilgrims, and could never shake them: And they will walk about, and seek entertainment of the Pilgrims; but for our sakes, shut the doors upon them.

Well, one by one they go, except for the boys and their wives. And there's a hint at the end that Bunyan may be tempted to write about the journey that the boys make — a kind of Part III of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which of course was never written.

Now what's the lesson here? Well, there's an important lesson here, and it comes to us in several ways, and the lesson is about death. For the Puritans, death wasn't the great unmentionable that it is for our society. We die, most of us, in hospital beds or nursing homes...comatose, drugged, pain-free perhaps. Generally speaking, that's the way most of us go. But that was not so for the Puritans. For the folk in Bunyan's time, half the population died before they reached maturity. Most of the children that were born died in infancy. Those who

lived to maturity and died, died at home. They died with their family and friends around them. The last words of those who died were particularly important; not just important, but, yes, rehearsed. There are books, of course, and you've utilized them — “The Famous Last Words of _____.” And some of those last words didn't just come in the spur of the moment. They had rehearsed these words. They had thought about what it was they wanted to say.

I have vivid memories of my grandfather's death, of being ushered into the room where he had been for several months dying of cancer. He was wide awake and very conscious, though in enormous pain. And he spoke words to each one of the four children. I vividly remember the words he spoke to me. I remember in particular the gift that he gave to me on that occasion. Within hours he was dead. And Bunyan lived in such times, and that's why he described with such vividness at the end how one by one they're called, and how one by one they give last words.

Now if you're using this edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the one that's been on sale in the book store, Oxford World Classics Edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, you have in the margin the notes that Bunyan added in the second or the third printing of *Pilgrim's Progress*. And if you just glance in the margins of the last four or five pages, you'll see Bunyan's words. He'll say “Last words... last words.... The last words of Christiana, “I come, Lord, to be with Thee and bless Thee”; the last words of Mr. Ready-to-halt, “Welcome, life!” The last words of Feeble-mind, “Hold out Faith and Patience.” The last words of Mr. Despondency, “Farewell, night, Welcome day.” The last words of Mr. Valiant-for-truth, “Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?” And Bunyan says when Mr. Valiant-for-truth said those words, the sound of trumpets were heard from the other side. Bunyan is perhaps thinking of the time when the New Model Army won the Battle of Naseby in 1645. He had been a soldier, you remember, under age, in the New Model Army. I'm not quite sure of how much of battle Bunyan saw, but I'm pretty sure he had heard the trumpet sound signaling victory, and there are many scholars who think that was the source of this idea of trumpets sounding for Mr. Valiant-for-truth.

Now for Mr. Standfast, well, let me read to you:

“This River [he says] has been a terror to many, yea, the thoughts of it also have often frightened me; but now methinks I stand easy, my foot is fixed upon that upon which the feet of the Priests that bare the Ark of the Covenant stood, while Israel went over this Jordan. The waters indeed are to the palate bitter, and to the stomach cold; yet the thoughts of what I am going to, and of the conduct that awaits for me on the other side, doth lie as a glowing coal at my heart.

I see myself now at the end of my Journey; my toilsome days are ended. I am going now to see that Head that was crowned with thorns, and that

“Face that was spit upon for me.

I have formerly lived by hear-say and Faith; but now I go where I shall live by Sight, and shall be with Him in whose company I delight myself.

I have loved to hear my Lord spoken of; and wherever I have seen the print of His shoe in the earth, there I have coveted to set my foot too.

His Name has been to me as a civet-box; yea, sweeter than all perfumes. His Voice to me has been most sweet; and His Countenance I have more desired than they that have most desired the light of the Sun. His Word I did use to gather for my food, and for antidotes against my faintings. He has held me, and I have kept me from mine iniquities; yea, my steps hath He strengthened in His Way.”

Now, while he was thus in discourse, his countenance changed, his strong man bowed under him; and after he had said, Take me, for I am come unto Thee, he ceased to be seen of them.

Well, that's Mr. Standfast, and a description of his going and his last words. How important last words were to Bunyan and those who wrote in the seventeenth century.

But not just last words, but last day. Christiana is called, and the letter says ‘you will be called in ten days.’ For Bunyan, you see, when it says in the Scriptures “it is appointed to man once to die,” that that day of death was like a date in Jesus’ calendar.

Every one of us is going to die on a particular day. It's written down. It's predestined. It's part of Jesus’ plan for you and for me. It may be tonight. It may be tomorrow. It may be next week, it may be several years from now, but it is written down. It cannot be changed. It cannot be altered.

This life for Bunyan is a gymnasium, it's a training ground for the world to come. Here we have no continuing City. We ought, Bunyan is saying, to be ready to go...to be packed up and ready for the day of our departure, because we don't know when that will be. There were no pills, no Social Security checks. Half the adult population in Bunyan's time died before maturity. Death was a reality. It was Dr. Johnson who famously said that when a man knows he's going to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully. They lived on the edge of eternity, expecting at any moment that God may call them home.

Do you know how different our lives would be if we lived like that? The things that are relatively important for us now would become relatively unimportant, and things that are unimportant would all of a sudden become very important. Bunyan isn't just making this up, you see. For him it's what the Bible teaches, that we are

to live our lives as those who at any moment may be called home to be with our Savior, to be reunited with those warriors in Christ who have gone before us.

And Bunyan's great question to you and me is: Are you ready? Are you ready to go? Do you have that mark on your forehead? Are you trusting in Jesus Christ, and Him alone? Do you bear His righteousness, His robe that ensures your entry on the other side? Are you one of God's children? Are you persevering? Are you continuing in the faith? Do you bear the marks of what it means to be one who is in union and communion with Jesus Christ?

And that's the way we should live. That's the only safe way to die.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You. Thank You for these solemn reminders in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress of the truth of Your word: that it is appointed unto man once to die, and after death, the Judgment. We thank You that in Jesus Christ we are safe and secure. Nothing in our hands we bring; simply to His cross we cling. Bless this word to our hearts, 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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