

A HOLY JOURNEY

by SCOT McKNIGHT

This month, we are pleased to present the first in a yearlong series of features on “spiritual masters”—writers of essential works on spiritual formation. The series begins with Scot McKnight’s look at John Bunyan (1628–1688), author of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Upcoming issues will include articles from North Park professors Boaz Johnson, Bradley Nassif, Genevive Dibley, and Kurt Peterson on spiritual masters such as Teresa of Avila, John Woolman, Philipp Jakob Spener, and Pundita Ramabai.—the Editors

Between my junior and senior years of high school, I experienced a spiritual awakening and a renewed enthusiasm for the Christian faith. At the heart of that renewal were four things—prayer, Bible reading, my church, and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which I read daily in my first hour study hall.

“Read” does not describe my experience of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. I was stunned by Bunyan’s work. Never before had I heard this kind of potent message of perseverance in faith. Never had I witnessed firsthand a person (however fictional) whose entire life was dominated by living every second of every day in light of final accountability. It deeply impressed me and also planted in me a belief that holiness is central to the Christian pilgrimage.

Preaching or teaching about holiness is not popular these days—probably out of the fear that it may lead us

back again into legalism. Bunyan reminds us that both love and holiness are essential parts of the message of the Scriptures.

A Brief Synopsis

The first page of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* establishes the entire direction of the book: the Christian life is a flight from sin and a pursuit of God. The book is a record of the temptations that Christian, the main character, meets and the means—the Bible, prayer, and (must less often) Christian fellowship—whereby he can handle temptation.

The temptations and virtues take the form of *personalities* Christian meets on the way. They include Obstinate and Pliable, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Legality, Goodwill, Simple, Sloth, Hypocrisy, Timorous, Mistrust, Piety, Faithful, Wanton, Deceit, Talkative, Hopeful, Mr. Money-love and Mr. Save-all, Error, Ignorance, and Little-Faith. The names pile up too high to list.

He also finds himself in the following *places*: Slough of Despond, Carnal Policy, the Wicket Gate, the Cross where he loses his burden, the Hill of Difficulty, the Palace called Beautiful, the Delectable Mountains, the Valley of Humiliation, the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair, Doubting Castle, and the Enchanted Ground. Though Christian stumbles at times, must backtrack, veers into dangerous moral territory, and doubts both the faith and his own heart, he endures.

He falters at the River, the final obstacle before entering the Celestial City, but is encouraged by Hopeful. “These troubles and distresses,” Hopeful tells Christian as he falls into doubt in that River, “are sent to try you, whether you will call to mind what you have received beforehand of his goodness, and live upon him in your distresses.” After crossing the River, Christian finds himself in the presence of God.

The Context

Bunyan, a tinker (someone who repaired pots and pans) by trade, was also a lay preacher. A Puritan, he wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress* while in prison for being a nonconformist—someone outside of the Anglican Church. In prison he learned to live by principle and not pragmatism: his blind daughter needed him and he could have been released had he agreed no longer to preach, but he refused to do so.

The Pilgrim’s Progress is more than a spiritual classic. In fact, it needs to be understood as a poor man’s protest against the state-sponsored religion on behalf of the freedom of religion. Tucked into this protest against the state is one of the more subtle features of the book: it is quietly but relentlessly against social and religious respectability and against the upper class. Bunyan’s “vice characters” often appears as upper-class gentleman—but under those respectable clothes of the gentleman is no genuine faith but mere formality.

Even if Bunyan's images exaggerate, many of us will find the temptations he faces the very ones we are facing. Many today would say that the reason Bunyan's tale has survived so long is because he has probed the human soul more deeply than most, and therefore opens up for us our own hearts and minds.

Fearing God and Avoiding Presumptuous Faith

George Marsden begins the final chapter of his biography of the American Puritan Jonathan Edwards with this statement: "Edwards spent his whole life preparing to die." The same can be said of Bunyan's Christian: throughout his pilgrimage he is fixed upon the final judgment, where he will have to answer to God for his life.

Many today find this sort of image of the Christian life oppressive; they find a God who will judge to be unloving. But the Bible is filled with judgment scenes, and we should all realize that their intention is to warn us of the importance of loving God with a sacred and devout heart.

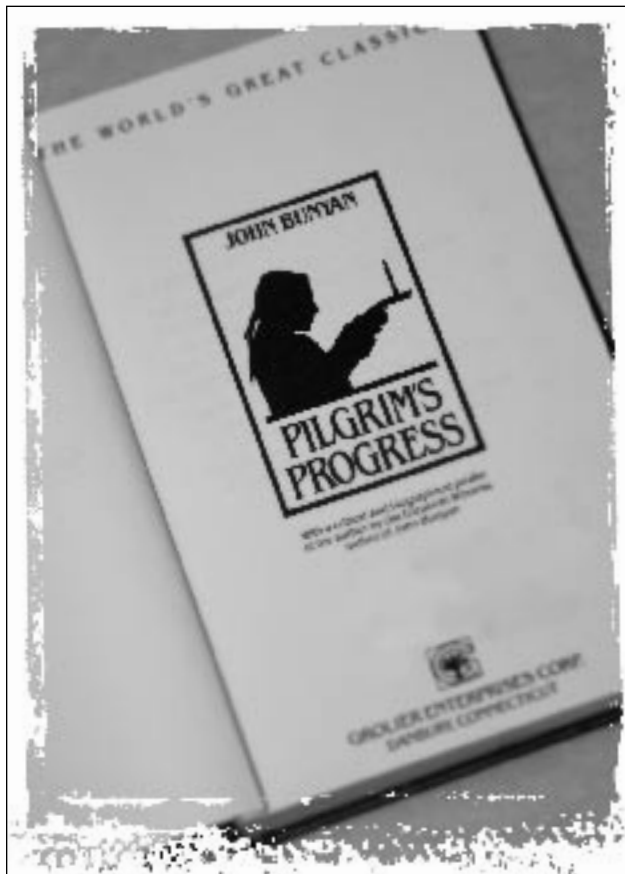
Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bunyan warns us about the dangers of "cheap grace." What Bonhoeffer called "discipleship," Bunyan would have called perseverance. But both of them understood that God's grace is meant to empower the Christian to live faithfully, to suffer if necessary (and both did), and to continue to trust in God until the very end. Grace is sometimes understood as divine neglect or providential tolerance, but for Bunyan grace was the work of God that emboldened the Christian to live a life of holiness and love.

The Christian Life Is a Journey

Bunyan turns Christian's life into a journey—into pits and around curves and over hills and between yawning chasms and into dense forests, and onto mountains where he can spy the Celestial City. A great deal of "journey"

language in spiritual formation studies today is indebted to Bunyan. It should not surprise us that two of Christianity's favorite fiction writers, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, are also given to journeys and both have acknowledged their debts to Bunyan.

Learning that the Christian life was



a journey was news to me. My impression was that it was a decision and, once done, business was taken care of. But Bunyan pinned me to the wall with his understanding of perseverance.

My own theological development in this area came to fruition when I studied conversion theory some years back and published *Turning to Jesus*. This study, which charted a path for us to tell both sudden and progressive conversion stories, made the case that some people's conversions are a journey of "gentle nods of the soul."

Three Cautions

However much I love John Bunyan's masterpiece, I am deeply aware of its limitations. A significant theme in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and one that dominated the Puritan conscience, is there is no assurance of salvation, of being one

of God's elect. Over and over in this classic tale, Christian worries that he might commit some sin that will cause him to slip into damnation and eternity apart from God. The abundant worrisomeness of Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* strains the sense of God's grace, love, and forgiveness.

Bunyan's preoccupation with Christian fleeing *from* this world (known as the City of Destruction) and fleeing *to* the Celestial City can lead to, and too often has led to, anti-worldly stances to such a degree that Christians drop any concern with social justice.

Being in this world but not if it, as Paul put it, does not mean that this world has to be absolutely denied. Peter, for one example, exhorted believers to be good citizens (1 Peter 2:11–3:12). We must utter again the need for balance: as Christians, we are called to live both *in* this world and *for* the eternal world.

The tendency of our day is to be devoted too much to this world, and not enough to a life-before-God. We need balance, the pleasing balance we find in Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, as seen in Pastor John

Ames, who watched his young son blowing bubbles while the cat chased the bubbles frantically. The son was so absorbed with the cat's play that he didn't notice the bubbles ascending toward heaven. Ames, watching from his window and ever-conscious of his own mortality, notices the ascent and speaks to the son: "You were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors."

I can think of no better picture of a life-before-God. So focused on our calling now that we are unconscious of its eternal dimension—so knowingly committed to our eternal accountability that we can't fail to live life to its utmost. □

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