

Thus Far I Did Come*John Bunyan (1628–1688)*

Thus far I did come laden with my sin;
 Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in
 Till I came hither: What a place is this!
 Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
 Must here the burden fall from off my back?
 Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
 Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be
 The Man that there was put to shame for me!

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Pilgrim's Progress, Part 4: The Interpreter's House

Kevin T. Bauder

After he passes through the Wicket Gate (salvation), but before he reaches the cross and the sepulcher (assurance), Christian stops to visit the Interpreter's House. Guided by the Interpreter, he is confronted with a series of unusual, vision-like scenes. Each scene is an allegory. The earliest allegories are explained for Christian by the Interpreter. By the time he completes the series, he is understanding the allegories for himself. Each allegory has a valuable lesson of its own, but each also trains the reader to understand *Pilgrim's Progress*.

In the first allegory Christian sees a painting of a grave person, eyes lifted up to heaven, the "Best of books" in his hand, the law of truth upon his lips, his back to the world, and a crown of gold suspended above his head. The man in the painting stands as if pleading. The Interpreter explains that this man represents the preacher of the gospel. He encourages Christian to study the man's features so that he will be able to recognize such individuals when he meets them. As a Puritan, Bunyan believed that believers would confront many false preachers, and he has the Interpreter warn Christian against them.

For the second allegory, the Interpreter shows Christian a large parlor filled with dust. Whenever someone tries to sweep the dust, it rises in great clouds and chokes those in the room; it cannot be swept up. Then a girl sprinkles the room with water, after which the dust can be swept out and the room cleaned. In answer to Christian's question, the Interpreter explains that the parlor is like the human heart apart from the grace of God. The dust is original sin and inward corruption. The sweeper is God's law. As a Puritan, Bunyan was far from despising the law, which (as Paul declares) is holy, and just, and good. Yet the effect of the law upon the graceless heart is to stir up sin (Rom 7:8–13). The water, therefore, must represent the gospel, which is the only way that sin can be forgiven and eventually removed.

The third allegory features two small children named Passion and Patience. As they sit in their chairs, Passion is discontented but Patience remains calm. A bag of treasure is poured out in front of Passion, who delights in it while scorning Patience. His treasure is soon gone, however, leaving him with only rags. According to the Interpreter, Passion is like people who live for



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the things of this world, which they enjoy for a moment and then lose. Patience, however, is like those who live for the world to come. These people will receive better things, the sort of things that they will never lose. Christian observes, “Then I perceive it is not best to covet things that are now, but to wait for things to come.”

In the fourth allegory, the Interpreter shows Christian a fire burning against a wall. A person stands there pouring water on it, but in spite of the water the flames rise higher and higher. The Interpreter explains that the fire represents the work of grace in the believer’s heart, which the Devil is constantly trying to quench. Then he leads Christian to the other side of the wall, where Christian sees another person constantly pouring oil on the fire, causing it to burn hotter. This individual pictures Christ, who “continually with the Oil of His Grace maintains the work already begun in the heart.” Even though the grace of Christ may be hidden, it is being constantly ministered to believers when they are tempted.

As the fifth allegory opens, the Interpreter leads Christian to a stately palace inhabited by people in golden robes. He wishes to go into the palace but discovers that a spy is stationed at the door to note the names of all who try to enter. Furthermore, soldiers in armor stand ready to assault any who attempt to go in. Nevertheless, one brave man dons a helmet and fights his way through the crowd to enter the palace.

This is the first allegory for which the Interpreter offers no explanation. Instead, Christian simply smiles and says, “I think verily I know the meaning of this.” And indeed, its meaning would have been plain in Bunyan’s time. Those who, during the reign of Charles II and James II, attempted to enter heaven through the true door of salvation, rejecting what they saw as the idolatries of Anglicanism, would meet direct opposition from the legal authorities. Records were kept of nonconformists, and the power of the sword was used against them.

Having discerned this meaning, Christian wishes to continue his journey to the Celestial City. The Interpreter, however, prevails upon him to wait for two more allegories. Both allegories stand as warnings for pilgrims.

In the sixth allegory, Christian sees a man sitting in the dark in an iron cage. The man explains that he once professed the gospel but turned aside into sin. Now he is gripped with despair, believing that he has so provoked God and hardened himself that he can no longer repent. The man is convinced that God Himself has shut him up in the cage. Whether Bunyan endorsed that man’s opinion is not clear. What is clear is that sin has led the man to despair, and as long as he remains in despair he will not repent. Whether this man was never saved, or whether he is saved and has utterly lost his assurance, his condition stands as a solemn warning.

The seventh allegory features a man rising, terrified, from bed. What has terrified him is a vivid dream of the last judgment. In his dream he witnessed the final salvation of the just and the final condemnation of the damned, and he felt the judge’s indignant eye upon him. Then in the dream the man pondered his sins and found himself abandoned by the angels as the pit of hell opened its mouth beside him.

As Bunyan’s narrative leaves this terrible dream the Interpreter asks, “Have you considered all these things?”

Christian replies, “Yes, and they put me in hope and fear.”

The Interpreter encourages Christian to remember what he has seen, and Christian departs to continue his journey. These allegories are a preparation for events that he will encounter on the road ahead. But how?

Their main value is that they depict perseverance in the faith. Some are helps to perseverance. Others are warnings against specific obstacles to perseverance. The last two are stern admonitions against failing to persevere. There will be times on the road when Christian is tempted toward slumber, pride, and even despair. These allegories will serve him well on the way ahead.

Furthermore, by this point in his narrative, Bunyan is introducing fantastic elements into his narrative. The fire that cannot be quenched and the man in the iron cage are examples. His employment of fantasy will increase during the subsequent narrative. Perhaps, then, a word about Bunyan’s use of fantasy is in order.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
