

August 25, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Communion
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Matthew 22:14.

1. For how long was John Bunyan under conviction about sin before he was born again?
2. Who determines how long a sinner is convicted before he/she is saved?
3. Were you born again instantaneously or was it a process?
4. Have you read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and if so, what did it teach you?
5. What do the "warning" passages in Hebrews 2,3,4,6,10,12 teach us?
6. How do the various types of soil in the Sower and the seed parable fit into the picture Bunyan gave us?

BETWEEN CONVICTION AND THE CROSS

Matthew 22:14

On two separate occasions, Jesus told similar stories about people who were invited to a banquet, but who rejected the invitation. We considered one of those situations recently in the course of our study through Luke's record of the Good News. There, Jesus told the story of a wealthy man who invited various people to a lavish banquet. But when the banquet was ready, the

people who had been invited offered differing excuses for why they could not attend. The master of the banquet responded with anger and invited many different kinds of people to take their places. In the chapter before that event, Jesus had warned the scribes and Pharisees to "*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able*" (Luke 13:24).

Matthew recorded that Jesus told the same kind of story in the context of teaching in the temple porches the week of His crucifixion. In that setting, Jesus told the parable of a father who threw a lavish banquet for his son's wedding. The same scenario was repeated with invitations offered and rejected. At the end of the story, Jesus applied the lesson that "*Many are called, but few are chosen*" (Matthew 22:14).

What does this invitation and agonizing to enter look like? You will remember in the Luke account of the banquet parable, the verb translated *strive* means to agonize. Did you agonize to be born again? Was your new birth similar to the agony of the actual birthing process or was it more like a painless C-section (painless for the baby)? Most of the Christians I have known in life would describe their salvation in rather simple, matter-of-fact terms. They heard the gospel, were convicted of sin, and asked Jesus to come into their hearts and forgive their sins. But is that really when they were born again?

I realize that daring to even ask that question qualifies me as some kind of heretic in most circles. After all, most Christians were instructed by their pastors to write the date of their salvation experience in the front of their Bible and never forget it. In fact, some pastors preach that if you cannot remember the actual experience of your salvation, you probably never got it.

John Bunyan didn't have that neat, instantaneous, Apostle-Paul-on-the-Damascus-Road kind of experience. His experience of coming to Christ, entering through the narrow door, was an experience of agonizing with sin for over a year. Later, when Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he illustrated that same kind of long, agonizing process of Christian sensing deep conviction, pressing on in agony toward the Wicket Gate (narrow

door), and still carrying the burden of sin until he fell at the cross where the burden of sin was finally rolled away.

I know that some of you also have had more of a Bunyan than a Paul kind of salvation experience. Like me, there was a precise day, a definitive time, when you came under conviction of sin. It is likely that at that time you voiced or at least “thought a prayer” to God asking for forgiveness. But as you have grown older and matured along the way, you also know that there was another time (or times) when the burden of sin grew immense and you cried out to God for help. At that time, more than any time in your life, you experienced forgiveness, the relief from sin’s guilt as God took your burden from you. Was that when you entered the kingdom?

The Bible has quite a bit to say about that period of time between conviction of sin and forgiveness of sin. Many, many people are on that road, in that time period, when it might appear they are born again. But they know full well that they are not forgiven. Some of those people are content to repeat religious mantras, keep religious rules, and convince themselves they are on their way to the Celestial City when they are not. That is the story of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

That is the story of salvation in many Christians’ experience.

John Bunyan’s Experience.

Most of the material included in this first point I have borrowed from John Roberts, *Memoir of John Bunyan*, Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2005, pp.1-53. He wrote how John Bunyan was born a sinner. His family was a typical poor family in seventeenth century Great Britain. Bunyan was born in Elstow, near Bedford, England in 1628. His father and, therefore, John were wandering vagrants, similar to but not the same as gypsies, with all the negative stigma that comes with such names. They were “tinkers,” craftsmen who wandered from town to town repairing pots and pans or anything made of tin.

A lot of people in that day were poor. But by Bunyan’s own assessment, “His descent was of a low and inconsiderable generation, his father’s house being of that rank which is meanest and most despised in the land.”

Bunyan was not only a typical poor man materially, but he was a typical sinner. By his own confession, he was never a drunkard or a womanizer. But he did acknowledge that he was a “Sabbath breaker, a profane swearer, and a blasphemer, and was the leader in all the mischievous adventures usually indulged in by wild lads of his years.” Here his own words as he admitted, “As for my natural life, for the time that I was without God in the world, it was indeed according to the course of this world, and to the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience. It was my delight to be taken captive of the devil at his will; being filled with all unrighteousness, that from a child I had but few equals, both for cursing, lying, and blaspheming the name of God.”

In that condition of material poverty, and worse spiritual poverty, God put John Bunyan under conviction of sin. It helped that his parents had some respect for God. John’s parents tried to teach him religious duties, which might have helped him realize even in childhood that he was a wicked sinner. And also, the English religious environment of the day was strongly influenced by Puritans. More important though was the fact that God had concern for Bunyan. John experienced recurring dreams that haunted him about the coming judgment for his sins. He also endured multiple near- death experiences that jarred his thoughts about judgment for sin. One time he fell into the sea. Another time he fell out of a boat into the river. He was nearly bitten by an adder. As a young man, he enlisted in the Royal Army. At the siege of Leicester, as his part of the army was ready to march into the front lines, another young man insisted on taking Bunyan’s place. That man was shot in the head with a musket ball and died. Experiences like that might tend to get a young a man’s attention. God authors and uses those experiences.

At the ripe old age of 19, Bunyan married a poor girl from similar circumstances as his own. All she brought into the marriage, as far as material goods, was two books her father had

given her: *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, and *Baily's Practice of Piety*. Bunyan frequently read those books to his wife, which was the beginning of intense conviction of sin. Then at about that same time, John and his wife began visiting a national church where he heard a sermon about Sabbath-breaking that also brought him under conviction.

In conjunction with that conviction, "In the middle of a game of *cat* in the village green, he tells us that a voice from heaven suddenly penetrated his soul with the awful questions, 'Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven or have thy sins and go to hell?' 'At this,' he says, 'I was put into an exceeding maze; whereupon leaving my cat upon the ground, I looked up into heaven, and was as if I had seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very highly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these and other ungodly pursuits.'"

At times John vowed to do better, even laying off swearing and Sabbath-breaking for periods of weeks or months at a time. Finally, God brought Bunyan face to face with his sin. He was repairing pans in a house in Bedford when he overheard the conversation of several pious (born again) women. They spoke of how God convicted them of sin, how they had repented, and how they had experienced the deep love of Jesus to forgive them and refresh and comfort them. They also spoke with joy of how they now recognized their own unrighteousness.

Bunyan wrote, "I went about my employment again; but their talk and discourse went with me, also my heart would tarry with them; for I was greatly affected with their words, both because by them I was convinced that I wanted the true token of a truly godly man, and also because by them I was convinced of the happy and blessed condition of him that was such an one."

Bunyan continued in this state for months. During that time he frequently sought to hear these women speak of the new life in Christ. And during that time he became more and more aware of his sin as it was evidenced in his associates.

Finally, through God's persistent grace, John Bunyan was born a saint. It came about during a time when he began to read Scripture.

However, at about this same time John almost became part of a heretical sect. It was a very popular and attractive heresy similar to our modern sect of Mormonism. God miraculously delivered Bunyan from error and drew him on to salvation.

Christ captured him through the faithful ministry of John Gifford, pastor of a Baptist Church in Bedford. Through the faithful preaching of God's Word, Gifford brought Bunyan closer and closer to the light of salvation. And the closer to the light he came, the more vigorously Bunyan rebelled. One day, he came to own an old copy of *Luther on Galatians* and read it, in spite of the fact that each time he opened it, it fell apart more and more (kind of like Bunyan's resistance to God's grace). Finally, after years of agonizing and fighting, Bunyan laid down his arms of rebellion against God and took up God's case against himself. He was baptized in the River Ouse in Bedford, at night because immersion was illegal at that time in England.

Christian's Experience.

All of the quotations in this section come directly from John Bunyan's story, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Knowing Bunyan's experience, his agonizing to enter through the narrow door, helps us see why he pictured Christian's coming to salvation the way he did. Like Bunyan, and like many of us, in the story Christian set out to find rescue from sin's consequences. He set on this course because he came under conviction of sin. The story reveals how this man named Christian opened the "book" and as he read he trembled and asked, "What shall I do?" Of course the book he read was the Bible.

The man's question, "What shall I do?" addressed two issues. First, he wanted to know how to escape the city that was destined to be destroyed because of sin (called in the story "The City of Destruction" which is a picture of our world). Second, Christian wanted to know how to be relieved of the burden on his back, which burden represents sin.

When Christian related this concern to his relatives, they thought him to be in a fit of distemper and attempted to relieve him of this “temporary” plight. He agonized against their efforts. One day while he was walking in a field, again reading “the book” Christian asks more specifically, “What shall I do to be saved?” At this point we modern, conservative, Bible-believing Christians would conclude that the man was ready to enter the narrow door and be saved. But God’s ways are not our ways. We must come to grips with the reality that in similar fashion, many people we know may still be “in the way” not “in the kingdom.”

In this condition Christian meets Evangelist. Evangelist asks, “Wherefore dost thou cry?” He confessed, “Sir, I perceive by this book in my hand that I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgment; and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second.”

Then said Evangelist, “Why not willing to die, since this life is attended with so many evils?” The man answered, “Because I fear that this burden that is upon my back will sink me lower than the grave, and I shall fall into Tophet. And sir, if I be not fit to go to prison, I am not fit, I am sure, to go to judgment, and from thence to execution; and the thoughts of these things makes me cry.”

Then said Evangelist, “If this be thy condition, why standest thou still?” He answered, “Because I know not wither to go.” Then he gave him a parchment roll, and there was written within, “Fly [flee] from the wrath to come.”

The man therefore read it, and looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, “Whither must I fly?” Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, “Do you see yonder Wicket gate?” The man said, “No.” Then said the other, “Do you see yonder shining light?” He said, “I think I do.” Then said Evangelist, “Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto: so shalt thou see the gate; at which when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.”

According to the story, Christian began to journey toward the “narrow door.” Quite soon, along the journey, Christian met up with a Mr. Pliable and Mr. Obstinate. Mr. Obstinate mocked Christian for even setting out to take the journey, and he himself

went back to the City of Destruction. Mr. Pliable, on the other hand, thought Christian to be wise and vowed to go with him to the Wicket gate. But along the way both Christian and Pliable fell into the “slough of despond.”

Extracting himself from the slough, Pliable returned to the city where he was mocked for not completing what he endeavored to do. He is the picture of the weedy soil that responded to the good seed only to be choked out by weeds of trouble that Jesus described in the parable of the Sower and the Seed.

Christian, on the other hand, being helped out of the muck by Mr. Help, continued on his way toward the Wicket gate. Eventually along that path, he ran into Mr. Worldly Wise, who redirected Christian to Mr. Loyalty in the village of Morality. This was a diversion from the truth, a plan to deceive Christian into attempting to gain salvation by legalism, by doing good deeds. God stopped Christian before he reached the village and, with the help of Evangelist who showed up providentially, Christian barely escaped this heresy. That sounds quite similar to Bunyan’s own experience of nearly joining the heretical sect.

The wonderful news in the story is when Christian came to the cross of Christ. We read how Christian finally arrived at the Wicket gate, knocked and it was opened to him. But we must not be confused at this point. This is not the point of salvation. Having knocked loud and long, finally the gate opened and Mr. Goodwill quickly pulled Christian inside. Then Mr. Goodwill instructed the pilgrim, “An open door is set before thee, and no man can shut it.” This is the promise for all who are ordained for salvation. But the way forward is a narrow way with many windings and turnings. And still, Christian learned, that he must bear his burden until he comes to the “place of deliverance.”

Finally, we see Christian coming to the house of Interpreter where he would learn many important lessons to protect him along the way. After being instructed in many areas about the journey to the cross, Interpreter sent Christian on his way. We read, “He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below in the bottom, a Sepulcher. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off

his back; and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulcher, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.”

Reading through this story, it is important for us to note that, the first 25% of the Pilgrim’s progress is his journey from the point of conviction to the cross and salvation! Is that biblical? Is that a picture of your journey to the cross? Do you know anyone else who did not have a Paul-on-the-Road-to-Damascus experience?

Divine Instruction.

The Bible truly does teach us that coming to Christ is difficult.

Jesus Himself warned that obtaining salvation is difficult. For example, as He watched the rich young ruler walk away from His invitation to salvation, Jesus commented on how difficult it is for rich people to be saved. Then we read, *And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:24).*

Jesus also taught, *“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12).* In various ways, Jesus taught that coming to Christ is all-out spiritual war. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bunyan pictured Goodwill pulling Christian inside the Wicket gate because demons from the Castle of Beelzebub shoot arrows at sinners who are trying to enter. That is warfare!

But isn’t salvation the wonderful free gift from God? Yes, it is certainly God’s gift to us needy sinners. And because it is His gift, it cannot be earned. But when God pours out His free gift on us, He drags us through the narrow door that strips all our fleshly, selfish, self-dependance from us. And the tribulation isn’t over even after we are born again. Therefore, Paul and Barnabas visited the Church in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, *Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).*

This process of striving to enter the door, proves the statement in our text that *“many are called, but few are chosen”*

(Matthew 22:14). Remember that Jesus made that statement in conclusion to the parable about the father inviting many to his son’s wedding feast. The truth is illustrated when we stop to consider the responses of the various soils when Jesus explained the parable of the Sower and the seed. He said, *“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Matthew 13:18-23).*

We see that two of the types of people described respond as though they were truly born again. They gladly receive the truth. However, neither of those kinds of people can produce the fruit that is desired by the Sower Jesus. This is not a picture of people who are born again then lose their salvation. This is a picture of the many people who respond to the common grace of God (the many who are called), but they never experience the miracle of regeneration. To invoke another parable, true wheat, unlike tares, is the desired fruit of the Sower’s seed.

Also, in thinking about this journey between conviction of sin and salvation at the cross, we need to consider Scripture’s warnings. The “ifs” of salvation are very important. For example, Peter warned, *For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it*

to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them (2 Peter 2:20-21).

Paul warned the Church in Colossae that Jesus *has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:22-23).*

He taught Timothy, *The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us (2 Timothy 2:11-12).* All of these “ifs” apply to sinners who are under conviction of sin and journeying toward the cross. If they do not endure the journey, come to the cross of Christ, and repent of their sins, they will never be saved.

God also warns us that this kind of religion without regeneration will be the character of the age before Christ returns. *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4).* It is quite certain that this is not a description of out-and-out pagans, but of professing Christians.

Finally, we do well to consider the examples in Scripture of these kinds of people who do not endure and are saved. Contrary to popular opinions, much of *The Letter to the Hebrews* is written to people who **almost** believed, **almost** were saved, **almost** went to heaven instead of hell. There are multiple statements to these unsaved people who were part of the visible, local church in chapters 2,3,4,6,10,12.

Therefore, people on the journey to the narrow door are challenged to hold fast to their confidence. *And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Hebrews 3:6).* Likewise, they are challenged to strive to enter and hold fast. *11) Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. . . . 13) And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to*

the eyes of him to whom we must give account. 14) Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession (Hebrews 4:11-14).

There is the warning that being familiar with God’s work is not the same as salvation. *For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:4-5).* Instead those people need to hold fast without wavering. *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:23).*

No one waltzes into the kingdom of God unscathed, unchallenged, and unchanged. This is a legitimate concern we should have for people who have been reared in Christian homes and educated in Christian environments. It is easy to learn and believe a lot about Christ without ever submitting to Christ as Lord when the flow of the river is religious. Like Bunyan, like Christian, like many of us, those who enter the narrow door and walk the narrow way are very aware of the agony of the dying-to-self process. We can be quite sure that where there has been no “striving,” there has been no entrance. It is quite possible that a person can endure this period of striving for a large part of their life before they finally lay down their arms of rebellion against God and take up God’s case against themselves.