

The Pilgrim's Progress

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The Author's Apology

When I first picked up my pen, my intention was not to write a little book using a figure of speech, an allegory. In fact, I was already working on another book.¹ When I was almost finished with the first one, and before I realized it, I was writing a second.

Here is my story. I was writing about the Way² and how the Bible represents the Christian life as a race³, when suddenly I began to think about the journey to heaven in allegorical terms. I came up with twenty comparisons and, when I had finished writing them all down, I thought of twenty more. Before I knew it, the ideas were multiplying in my mind like sparks shooting up from hot coals. So I thought to myself, "Since these ideas are breeding so quickly, I need to put them in another book, for they may never stop multiplying and consume the book that I am currently working on."

And that is exactly what I did. When I finished the first book and began to work on the allegory, I had no idea — it didn't enter my mind — that I would publish it for the world to see. In fact, I wasn't even sure what I was trying to write. And I certainly wasn't trying to please my neighbors. Not me. I only wrote it to satisfy myself.

I spent my free time in jail working on this book.⁴ It was a diversion, my way of overcoming the kind of wrong thinking that leads me to be disobedient.

I was delighted to write, and quickly recorded my thoughts on paper. By the time I finished, I knew what my writing style would be. Then, new ideas kept popping into my mind. So I wrote and wrote until...well, it turned out to be a rather large volume.

After I completed the whole book, I showed it to others so I could get their reactions to it. Would they criticize or praise it? Some said, "Let these words live!" while others said, "Let them die!" Some said, "John, publish it." Others said, "Don't do it." Some said, "It might do good." Others said, "It won't."

Now I was in a dilemma and could not decide what to do. Finally I thought, "Since you are all divided on the matter, I am going to go ahead and publish it." And that's exactly what I did.

¹ Probably *The Strait Gate*, which meets all the requirements for being the one Bunyan refers to here. It is concerned with "the Way and Race of Saints," and was published by Bunyan in 1676. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was submitted to Stationers' Hall one year later in 1677. See John Brown's *John Bunyan*, p. 247, for additional details. The OET (Oxford English Texts) version of *Pilgrim's Progress* argues that the book Bunyan referred to was *The Heavenly Footman*, posthumously published in 1698 (*Pilgrim's Progress*, edited by N.H. Keeble, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 264).

² See Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4. "The Way was the oldest designation of the Christian Church for itself" (NBD, 1318).

³ Cf. I Cor. 9:24; Heb. 12:1,2.

⁴ Probably written in the prison on the Bedford Bridge (the city jail) in the early months of 1676, though Joyce Godber argues for the second half of Bunyan's twelve-year imprisonment (1666-72) in the county jail (*Pilgrim's Progress*, edited by N.H. Keeble, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 264).

My rationale for going ahead with the project was this: “It was clear that some wanted it published, while others did not. So I thought I would put both groups to the test to see who had offered the best advice.”

Furthermore, if I refused to publish the book for those interested, I might rob them of a great joy.

To those who were against publishing it, I said, “I do not want to offend you! But since your fellow believers are pleased with it, please postpone your judgment until you know more about it.”

“If you refuse to read it, then drop the issue. Everyone is not the same. Some love the meat, while others love to pick at the bone.” This is the way I reasoned with them in order to reduce the tension between us.

Am I forbidden from writing in this style, from using an allegory? What if I accomplish my purpose, which is your ultimate good? Then why is it wrong? After all, dark clouds bring rain, while the bright ones bring none. But whether dark or bright, as long as they release the rain, the Earth praises them both for the crops they bring forth and refuses to find fault with either. She treasures the fruit they produced by working together. As a matter of fact, the Earth mixes the two together so that no one can distinguish the one from the other in the fruit. The truth is, when the Earth is thirsty, both kinds of clouds satisfy her well; but if the ground is already saturated, she can’t absorb any more rain, and the fruit is ruined.

Have you not seen the various ways a fisherman attempts to catch fish? Don’t you see all the gear he employs? Notice how he uses all of his skills, as well as his lures, lines, angles, hooks, and nets. Yet everyone knows that there are fish that will never be caught, no matter what hook, line, snare, net, or method he uses. They must be groped for and tickled, or they will not be caught...no matter what you do.

How does the hunter try to catch his game? He uses so many different means that it is impossible to name them all. To name a few: his gun, his nets, his lime-twigs⁵, a light, and a bell. He creeps, he walks, he stands. Who can explain all his positions? Yet none of his methods will ensure that he will be able to catch whatever bird he pleases. For one type of bird, he must resort to his bird whistle. But another bird will get away when he uses it.

If a pearl can be found in a toad’s head⁶ and also in an oyster; and if certain things are so ordinary that they don’t hold promise for anything of value but yield things as good as

⁵ Twigs smeared with birdlime to snare birds. Birdlime is “a sticky substance, usually made of the juice of holly bark or mistletoe berries, extracted by boiling. It is used to catch birds by smearing it on the twigs of a bush” (Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary).

⁶ A toadstone was “a stone or similar object formerly thought to have been formed inside a toad’s head or body and often worn as a charm” (Webster’s Twentieth). Warren Wiersbe notes that Shakespeare mentions this in *As You Like It*, II, i. 12-14: “Which like a toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head” (*The Annotated Pilgrim’s Progress*, p. 15).

gold, then who is going to be so proud that he will not look in an uncommon place if he thinks he might find something of value? Then consider my little book (which, by the way, has no pictures in it that would make one publisher take it over another). It is not lacking in things that really matter just because the truths are clothed in bold metaphors.

Well, I am not convinced that this book of mine will stand when fully examined.

Why, what's the matter? Some say the book is dark. So? Some say it is contrived. Do I really believe that? Yet some people have made the truth sparkle and its rays to shine by using figurative language, haven't they? But my critics want straightforward Bible teaching and doctrine. So I am being told to speak more directly. Metaphors, they say, overpower weaker believers and blind us from the truth.

I agree, that when one writes about spiritual matters for other people, it is important that he provide solid teaching. But if I use metaphors in my writing, is solid teaching necessarily lacking? Isn't it true that God's laws were presented in the past through types, shadows, and metaphors? A wise man will be reluctant to find fault with them, for he would be assaulting the highest Wisdom. Rather, he humbles himself and seeks to learn how God has spoken to him through clasps and loops⁷, through calves and sheep, heifers, and rams; through birds, herbs, and by the blood of the lambs. Happy is the one who finds the light, and the grace that is in them.

Therefore, don't be too quick to conclude that I am lacking in solid teaching, that I am unrefined. Things that appear to be solid on the outside are not necessarily so. We don't despise parables, do we? If we did, we might receive the truths that are most painful with a grain of salt and deprive our very souls of things that are good for us.

My dark and cloudy words do contain the truth, as cabinets house the gold.

The prophets used many metaphors to set forth the truth. And whoever reflects on Christ and his Apostles will clearly see that truths are presented in figures of speech to this very day.

Am I afraid to say that the Holy Scriptures, which contains all wisdom, is full of dark figures and allegories? No. From the Bible springs that splendor and those rays of light that turns our darkest nights into days.

Come, let him who mocks me examine his own life. Surely he will find darker things there than in my book. As a matter of fact, remind him that even the good things in his life are tainted with sin.

If only we could stand before impartial people! For every one my mocker puts forth, I will offer ten, and maintain that they will understand the meaning of this allegory far better than his silvercoated lies. Listen! Truth, even when presented in allegorical language, informs the judgment, purifies the mind, pleases the understanding, and makes

⁷ Used in making the curtains for the Tabernacle (Ex. 26:1-6; 36:8-13).

the will more submissive. It also fills the memory with the things that spring from our imagination and soothes our troubles.

I know that Timothy was exhorted to use sound words and to avoid old wives tales. But Paul, even though he was a serious man, never forbade the use of parables, in which are hidden gold, pearls, and precious stones. These are all worth digging for, as long as they are sought with wisdom.

Let me add one more thought for you who are godly! Are you offended? Do you wish that I had presented these truths in another form, or that I had been more explicit in my writing? Then let me explain three things to you who are better than me:

1. I do not believe that I am forbidden to use the method I have chosen. I am not defiling the words, the ideas, or my readers; nor am I presumptuous in the way I apply this figure of speech, or allegory. I am only trying to advance the Truth, whether I use this means or another. Forbidden...is this what I said? No. I have permission to express to you the things that are in my mind, things that are excellent (I also have examples from the past of those who pleased God with their words and their ways better than anyone who is alive today).
2. I find that well-respected men have written theological works using dialogue, and no one criticizes them for writing in this style. Indeed, if they defile the Truth, may they be cursed as well as the style they use for that purpose. But let the Truth be free to impact you and me in whatever way pleases God. For who knows better than the One who first taught us to plow⁸, how to guide our minds and pens for his purposes. God even uses ordinary things to usher in the Divine.
3. I have found that the Bible frequently uses figures of speech, where one thing is used to explain another. So then, I may use figures of speech as well, as long as I don't smother the Truth. In fact, by using an allegory, I will make the Truth as bright as the light of day.

And now, before I put my pen down, I would like to show you the benefit of my book. Then I will commit both you and my book into God's hand — the hand that pulls the strong down and makes weak ones stand.

This book presents you with the story of a man who seeks the everlasting prize. It tells you from whence he came and where he is going; what he leaves undone, and what he does. It also shows you how he runs and runs until he comes to the gate of Glory.

It also exposes those who set out to find life with great energy, all the while thinking they would attain the eternal crown. In my book you will discover the reason why they forfeit all their labor, and die like fools.

⁸ Isaiah 28:24-26; I Cor. 9:9-10.

This book will make a traveler out of you, if you will be ruled by its counsel. It will direct you to the Holy Land, if you follow its directions. It will even make the slothful, active; and the blind will see delightful things.

Are you in the mood for something rare and beneficial? Can you see a Truth within a fable? Are you forgetful? Would you like to remember something throughout the year, from New Years Day until the end of December? Then read my metaphors; they will stick like burrs, and may comfort the helpless.

This book is written in the form of a dialogue and, therefore, may even stimulate the minds of those who seem to be indifferent. It may seem like a novelty, but it contains nothing but sound and honest truths from the gospel.

Would you like to turn aside from your sadness and depression? Would you like to live right, and stay as far away from foolish behavior as possible? Would you like to understand these riddles and their explanation, or will you continue to reject truth in favor of your own private thoughts? Do you love picking at a steak bone, getting as much meat as possible from it? Would you like to see the formation of a man in the clouds and listen to him speak to you? Would you like to be in a dream, and yet not sleep? Would you like to laugh and cry at the same time? If you knew you would not suffer any harm, would you like to lose yourself so you could find your true self again? Would you read this book for yourself, even if you don't know what you are reading, and discover whether you are blessed or not? If so, then come here and lay my book, your head, and your heart together.

JOHN BUNYAN