

A P A R E N T ' S  
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G U I D E

# Pilgrim's Progress

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# Can a 17th-Century Allegory Teach Us Anything about Modern Life?

John Bunyan's novel is one of the [most popular books](#) of all time (the Bible is number one). It has never been out of print, and it's been turned into a [comic book](#), a 2-part [Adventures in Odyssey](#) episode, and, most recently, [an animated film](#) from Revelation Media. Through all this attention, however, is there anything we can still glean from this story? After all, this book is really old—like 17th century old—and the main character is named Christian. Talk about thinly veiled allegory. Could this story still be applicable to our lives? If we ask the right questions, there is still much we can learn and teach our teens about trials and tribulations that we as Christians must face on our path to sanctification.

## — What is *The Pilgrim's Progress*?

Originally titled *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*, Bunyan's allegory details his understanding of the spiritual journey upon which one embarks when they begin asking questions about God, the Bible, and Christianity. It's unique in that it doesn't end when the protagonist (Christian) decides to become a Christian, but continues detailing his life until he dies and goes to Heaven. But to really understand the masterpiece, we must first understand the man who wrote it and the backdrop against which he wrote it.

## — Who was John Bunyan?

Born in England in the early 1600s, John Bunyan grew up poor, learning the trade of metalwork from his father. He [was married](#) around the age of 21 and became a Christian a few years later, eventually becoming part of the [Puritan Movement](#). After having been married for several years, his wife passed away, leaving him with 4 children. He remarried a woman named Elizabeth shortly thereafter. During this time, he began preaching the Gospel and gathered quite a following, despite the fact that the law only allowed [members of the Church of England to preach](#). Bunyan was a Baptist (i.e. *not* a member of the Church of England), so only a year after marrying Elizabeth, he went to prison—for 12 years.

According to [this introduction](#), in prison Bunyan was treated well by the guards, but was also under constant fear of execution at any moment. If he would just renounce preaching the Gospel, he would be released, but he refused and thus stayed in prison, where he wrote many books until being released in 1672, thanks to the [Declaration of Religious Indulgence](#). However, his freedom was short lived; he was imprisoned again 3 years later, this time for 6 months. Shortly after his second release, the first edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* was [published in 1678](#). Bunyan continued preaching and writing until he [passed away in 1688](#) during one of his preaching visits to London.

As mentioned earlier, Bunyan was a Puritan, who were known for their strictness and legalism, so Bunyan's theology was not only specific to his time, but also highly

influenced by Puritanism. As a result, many of the viewpoints and conclusions in his book are worth comparing with Scripture and discussing at length.

## — Why did he write it?

In short, Bunyan wrote to help the people of his church. (As John Newton points out in [his preface](#) to the book, if Bunyan hadn't gone to prison, it's unlikely that anyone but those who were part of his congregations would have been impacted by him.) At its core, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a work of folk literature, written for the common people of his time, to help them better grasp and understand what it meant to devote their lives to God.

## — What lessons can be learned from it?

There are *many* aspects of the book that can and should be talked about. But since it's quite a long story—it's traditionally divided into 2 parts, with Part 1 chronicling Christian's journey to the Celestial City, and Part 2 chronicling his wife's and children's journey after him—space only allows us to discuss a few key places and characters from Part 1 here. (All the more reason to read/listen to the whole thing together!)

**Christian Pilgrim.** The main character. As the name implies, Christian symbolizes Christians on the path to sanctification. He has an irremovable burden on his back that represents the burden of sin we all carry. His life is not easy when he chooses to leave his family and follow the path. His journey is hard, and he has to face many obstacles on the way. He stumbles, makes bad decisions, asks forgiveness for his poor choices, and meets all sorts of characters along his journey. He is relatable in his humanity. He questions things, misses his wife and children, and gets scared but has moments of great courage. He oftentimes finds himself in over his head, but then help arrives and sets him back on the path.

**Discussion:** Talking with your teens about how they relate to Christian's character and how they see themselves in his journey can be a great conversation starter for where they are in their journey. Ask: What burdens are you carrying? Do you ever feel like you're alone in your journey or that you need to follow the path perfectly? Why/why not?

**The Book.** The Bible.

**The Celestial City.** Heaven.

**The Prince.** Jesus Christ. He created and maintains the path for His pilgrims and releases Christian from his burden.

**The Path.** A physical path representing the path to sanctification. Christian strays from the path many times throughout the book—a notable time being when he tries to

bypass the Prince and goes to visit Mr. Legality to remove his burden. Oftentimes, the path God has laid out for us is not enticing, and other ways look easier or more fun. In addition, other people (like Mr. Worldly Wiseman) try and lure Christian from the path with empty promises, and sometimes these evil characters have success.

**Discussion Questions:** Has something God asked of you ever seemed boring, hard, or not fun? Why do you think God asked you to do it? Why do you think He asks you not to pursue other things that seem more fun or exciting?

**Evangelist.** Evangelist helps Christian realize he needs to follow the path in order to relieve his burden. The Book helped Christian realize he needed to do something, but Evangelist helped him figure out [which direction to go](#). Without Evangelist, Christian may have never fully understood where to travel and died an old, miserable man in the City of Destruction. He also seems to turn up just in the nick of time to help get Christian out of trouble, and helps Christian realize the error of leaving the Path.

**Discussion:** Evangelist *wasn't* a preacher or missionary; he was just a normal guy who wanted to help others. And he didn't have fancy speeches or diagrams, he just talked with Christian. How do you see that playing out today? Can you give examples of someone who shares the Gospel well and someone who doesn't? What do you think makes the difference? Who do you have in your life who is willing to simply live life with you and help you understand the Gospel better? How do you do that for others?

**The Interpreter.** The Interpreter [represents the Holy Spirit](#), teaching Christian about his newfound faith and guiding him. Using metaphor and allegory, he shows Christian how his new faith will play out both in his life and in his journey to the Celestial City.

**Discussion Questions:** Practically speaking, how do we embrace the help of the Holy Spirit and allow Him to help us understand God and His Word better? How do you know when it's the Holy Spirit and when it's not?

**The Slough of Despond.** Shortly into Christian's journey, he finds himself stuck in the Slough ([swamp](#)) of Despond. As Help (yes, there's a character named Help, and yes, he is quite helpful), the man who came to Christian's aid and pulled him out, [explains](#):

*For still, as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there arises in his soul many fears and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place: and this is the reason of the badness of this ground.*

These fears and doubts partially held such a grip on Christian because of the burden he was carrying. As he tried to free himself from the mire, the burden only weighed him down.

**Discussion Questions:** How can our fears and doubts control our lives? Are we afraid of things deep down that we need to release to God? How can our sin make it harder for us to do that?

**Mr. Worldly Wiseman.** Mr. W enters the picture traveling the opposite direction from Christian. They meet on the road, and he proceeds to convince Christian to stray from the path and cruise over to the Village Morality. He represents the non-Christians in

our lives who value [the wisdom of the world](#). These people will try to convince us there are better, easier ways to salvation, and that what we have here on earth is what truly matters.

**The Village Morality.** The home of Mr. Legality. Mr. W tells Christian to leave the Path to go to the Village Morality because Mr. Legality could supposedly remove Christian's burden without the help of the Prince. As Christian approaches the Village, the hill he has to climb becomes extremely steep to the point of being overhanging, and Christian is worried it will fall on him. He is saved just in the nick of time by Evangelist. Mr. Legality and the Village Morality represent trying to remove the burden of sin through being "good." We think if we can just make ourselves worthy by following all the rules, *then* God will accept us. But we're crushed by the rules and legalism in the process, no closer to salvation. It's a great conversation starter about how God's grace works and what it means for how we live our lives.

**Discussion Questions:** How do you perceive God's grace? Does it seem like you have to earn it? Why? Is it hard or easy for you to accept it?

**The Wicker Gate.** The Gate, which was opened by Mr. Goodwill after Christian knocked, [represents Christ](#). It's the point of "conversion" in Christian's journey, in which he fully embraces the path of the Prince. Inscribed on the gate are the words, "Knock and it shall be opened to you." Christian knocks, is questioned by Mr. Goodwill (presumably to make sure he is worthy of entrance), then greeted and ushered through the gate. This is an important part of the story because once Christian passes through the gate, his journey doesn't get easier—it gets much, much more difficult. Much like our own journeys, simply following Jesus is no guarantee that life will be easier, and in fact, it will probably be a good deal more difficult than living as the world tells us. This is also a [point of contention](#) that some biblical scholars have with Bunyan's work: Christian does not lose his burden at this point, but rather keeps it for quite a while longer before it is cast off in front of the Cross (at the Place of Deliverance) and allowed to roll down into the an open tomb.

**Discussion Questions:** Should we expect our path to be easier after we decide to follow Jesus? Why do you think that Christian didn't lose his burden as soon as he passed through the Gate?

**The Cross.** As Christian stands under the Cross, his burden falls away, and three angels tell him his sins have been forgiven. After this, the angels clothe him in new clothes, stripping his old rags away, and give him a scroll with a golden seal to take to the kingdom. This is Christian's rebirth; he is now one of the Chosen Ones and has the seal to prove it. This obviously represents the power that Jesus wields to relieve us of our burdens forever and take our sins upon Himself because of His death and resurrection.

**The Valley of the Shadow of Death.** A solitary, dark, and dangerous place. Christian cannot see the ground where he is walking because it's so dark, yet to one side is mire and the other is a deep ditch. In [his online commentary](#), Ken Puls says:

*Bunyan describes the valley as "a very solitary place." Here we feel alone, isolated, and even abandoned. No one can possibly understand what we are going through. It*

*seems like God Himself has hidden His face. It is a wilderness full of danger—a place where we are spiritually parched, dry, drained, and unsatisfied.*

It seems that Bunyan wants us to remember that this, too, will pass and that the Lord will deliver us out of valleys if we trust Him.

**Apollyon.** Christian is confronted by and forced to fight with Apollyon on his journey to the Celestial City. Bunyan's description of Apollyon conjures up the image of a fire-breathing dragon, with scales and the ability to throw fiery darts at Christian. Apollyon is clearly meant to represent the Devil, and before their conflict, he has [this conversation with Christian](#):

***APOL.** Whence came you, and whither are you bound?*

***CHR.** I am come from the city of Destruction, which is the place of all evil, and I am going to the city of Zion.*

***APOL.** By this I perceive thou art one of my subjects; for all that country is mine, and I am the prince and god of it. How is it, then, that thou hast run away from thy king? Were it not that I hope thou mayest do me more service, I would strike thee now at one blow to the ground.*

***CHR.** I was, indeed, born in your dominions, but your service was hard, and your wages such as a man could not live on; for the wages of sin is death, Rom. 6:23; therefore, when I was come to years, I did, as other considerate persons do, look out if perhaps I might mend myself.*

***APOL.** There is no prince that will thus lightly lose his subjects, neither will I as yet lose thee; but since thou complainest of thy service and wages, be content to go back, and what our country will afford I do here promise to give thee.*

***CHR.** But I have let myself to another, even to the King of princes; and how can I with fairness go back with thee?*

Unable to dissuade Christian from his quest, Apollyon then tries to kill him right then and there. Christian is able to defend himself with the [sword and armor](#) he was given by the Prince.

Obviously, this physical battle represents the very intangible spiritual battle we will all go through starting the moment we choose to follow Christ. Bunyan's battle can help us all realize the severity, importance, and reality of our own battle, even though we can't see it happening or use a physical sword to fight it. The devil will try to dissuade us and convince us that we are not meant for the Kingdom of God, and if we do not submit, he will attack us in other ways. Just like Christian, we must take up the armor of God and use it to defend ourselves.

Another interesting point here is that the Prince had foreseen that Christian would need to defend himself on his journey. Once again, Bunyan helps us see that this path will not be easy or safe, but that the Prince will provide us with the tools we need. It was still Christian's responsibility to use the tools; the Prince didn't show up and battle in his place. We must understand the tools God has given us to protect ourselves (prayer, reading His Word, etc.), and also that the responsibility of the fight ultimately rests on us.

**Discussion Questions:** When you have doubts, fears, anger, sadness, etc., there's

often a spiritual component (i.e. it's not just you!). What can you do to deal with that spiritual component? Why do you think the Bible calls it the "[armor of God](#)"? Do you feel like you know how to use it?

**Valley of Humiliation.** Where Christian meets Apollyon. Apollyon confronts Christian about why he left his city (which is under Apollyon's rule), accusing him of being unfaithful and unworthy of salvation by the Prince.

**Discussion:** Talking with our teens about feelings of unworthiness and being open that [we are being attacked by Satan](#)—who might even use our past transgressions as proof against us—can be helpful in understanding the trials we all go through on our journeys. Ask: How does Satan attack you specifically? How can I help you when you're feeling attacked?

**Vanity Fair.** A fair set up by Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion to waylay pilgrims on their way to the Celestial City. Anything of worldly value can be found here, and everything is designed to distract and hinder pilgrims on their way through worldly living. Because Christian and his friend Faithful would not participate in the wares of the street vendors, they are arrested, and Faithful is eventually martyred when they refuse to give up the Prince. The things offered at Vanity Fair are both material (gold, wealth) and prestige (titles, honors, etc). Bunyan seems to be telling us to keep watch on ourselves and our desires for worldly things lest they become distracting from our true quest, and that we will [stand out](#) from the rest of the world because of this.

**Discussion Questions:** Are there areas in your life where worldly things are more important than your relationship with God? Are we never supposed to enjoy things in this world? How do you know?

**Faithful.** Christian meets Faithful, a fellow pilgrim, on the Path before reaching Vanity Fair. After the two enter Vanity Fair and are arrested for refusing to partake in the worldly offerings there, they are imprisoned and forced to stand a rigged trial. After false witnesses are brought against them and they refuse to give up their quest, Christian is imprisoned, and Faithful is sent to a gruesome [death of mutilation and burning](#):

*They therefore brought him out, to do with him according to their law; and first they scourged him, then they buffeted him, then they lanced his flesh with knives; after that they stoned him with stones, then pricked him with their swords; and last of all they burned him to ashes at the stake. Thus came FAITHFUL to his end. Now I saw that there stood behind the multitude a chariot and a couple of horses waiting for FAITHFUL, who —so soon as his adversaries had dispatched him—was taken up into it, and straightway was carried up through the clouds, with sound of trumpet, the nearest way to the Celestial Gate.*

Faithful is martyred for what he believes, never renouncing his journey or the Prince.

**Discussion:** It's rare today for Christians in the west to be martyred for their faith; we may never be asked to choose between our faith and our lives. But we very likely will have times where we have to choose between our faith and our social lives or our friends or a grade or likes and followers....Has there ever been a time

like that for you? Do you feel like you made the right choice? Why or why not? Do you think it's harder to choose to die for your faith or to live for your faith?

**Hopeful.** After Faithful is martyred, Christian escapes Vanity Fair with the help of another companion with a not-so-subtle name. He also helps Christian regain his hope in the Prince while in the Dungeon of Despair, as well as leads the way across the River into the Celestial City. He represents the hope that's possible because of Christ and that's needed to continue the journey. He also demonstrates that the people we surround ourselves with have a profound influence on our lives, for both good and bad.

**Discussion Questions:** Even when a specific situation seems hopeless, we always have ultimate hope that God is working to restore and renew all things forever. Does that hope seem real to you? Why/why not? What makes it hard for you to have hope in our world today? Do you know someone who lives out hope well? Why do you think that is?

**Giant Despair.** The Giant Despair captures Christian and his new traveling companion, Hopeful, after they stray from the Path yet again (oh, Christian, when will you learn?). The Giant then throws them into the dungeon of his Doubting Castle. The Giant decides to convince the pilgrims to commit suicide since they had no hope of ever escaping. Christian is willing to strangle himself instead of suffering for the rest of his life in the dungeon, but Hopeful [isn't convinced](#) this is what the Prince would want:

*Indeed our present condition is dreadful, and death would be far more welcome to me than thus forever to abide; but yet let us consider, the Lord of the country to which we are going hath said, "Thou shalt do no murder," no, not to another man's person. Much more, then, are we forbidden to take his counsel to kill ourselves. Besides, he that kills another can but commit murder upon his body; but for one to kill himself, is to kill body and soul at once. And, moreover, my brother, thou talkest of ease in the grave; but hast thou forgotten the hell, whither for certain the murderers go? "For no murderer hath eternal life."*

Though this seems to be Bunyan giving his beliefs about suicide, [one writer thinks](#) that there are at least two other meanings at play here. The first, keeping in stride with the rest of the book, is that no matter how dire and bleak keeping to the Way might look, taking shortcuts and an easy way out that goes against Scripture is never the solution. The second point comes just a little later in the story, when Christian remembers he has the key of Promise, which will allow the pilgrims to escape from their cages. "In modern language, Christian had in his possession all of the promises of God, and therefore he had no need to be a captive to despair."

**Discussion:** (More appropriate for older kids who understand the concept of suicide) Have you ever wondered what happens to someone who commits suicide? What answers did you find? What does the Bible say about it? Have you (or a friend) ever felt like your life is so screwed up that nothing could fix it? If so, what'd you do when you felt that way? Is it possible that repeating and meditating on the promises of God won't fix your problems immediately? What should you do then?

**The River.** The River that Christian must cross before entering the Celestial City symbolizes death. Christian must have faith as he crosses the river that he is in the hands of the Prince. This is the final stage of his journey, and he is fearful as he steps into the water and begins to sink, though he musters his courage and is able to get across. Death is the end of our journey, too, and talking about this with our teens can lay helpful groundwork that they can rely on as they grow up and watch others they care about pass away.

## — How does it apply to us today?

Though possibly eye-roll-inducing with its less-than-subtle names and allegories, *Pilgrim's Progress* can be a great way to start conversations about deeply spiritual truths. Perhaps its most timeless quality is its imagery. Bunyan was able to paint, through a complete lack of subtlety, vivid images that give a fresh perspective on the Gospel, humanity, sin, suffering, fear, and redemption. Picturing Christian locked in combat with Apollyon or remembering the Key of Promise in the Dungeon of Despair helps make our Christian "walk"—an often nebulous, vague concept—become more tangible, relatable, and understandable. The novel can be a catalyst for conversations about things that matter, and it can get our teens and pre-teens thinking beyond just the here and now.

One way to make it more relatable is to read an updated version with modern language. Sometimes all the "shalt"s and "thou"s and "whither"s, though beautiful, can be confusing or tiresome, making it harder for a reader to comprehend or to see how it's relevant. In addition, social media, smartphones, TV, online shopping, video games, etc. didn't exist when Bunyan penned the story. So you can make it more relevant to yours kids' lives by contextualizing; sure, they may not care [about pearls or precious stones](#), but they probably care about the latest trend on Instagram or the newest video games. Sure, they may not care about being called "Duke" or "Duchess," but they might care about getting a blue check mark next to their Twitter handle or being captain of the soccer team. Helping them see how the exact details may have changed while the underlying concepts and struggles have remained the same can also help them see why a Man who died 2,000 years ago matters to their everyday lives in the 21st century.

Finally, though Bunyan chose to use different characters to represent different traits and characteristics, something we need to help our children understand is that everyone is capable of hope, deep faith, courage, and perseverance, just as everyone is capable of doubt, deception, treachery, fear, and distraction. We may go through periods of time in which being courageous is much easier than others, or in which our doubts seem all-encompassing but later seem trivial and even silly. So just like we might need someone to bring hope into our lives when we're in despair, we may later need to be hope for someone else during their despair. It's all an ebb and flow, and seeing these traits so strongly displayed through Bunyan's characters can be good reminders that we all have it within us, even when we don't think we do.

And if you have younger kids, the story is now more accessible to them than ever. Revelation Media's [animated film](#) does a great job of bringing the journey to life in

an age-appropriate way. Avoiding topics that are too complex for young minds (like suicide), the film captures the emotions, fears, triumphs, and doubts of the tale in a way that younger children can understand and even relate to.

## Final Thoughts

Walking through the key characters and places in *Pilgrim's Progress* demonstrates just how complex, confusing, and yet rewarding the Christian walk is. It's full of danger and opportunities to misstep, but it's also filled with forgiveness, hope, and life-giving community. There is so much more that can be learned from Bunyan's masterpiece, and reading (or listening to or watching) it with your teen and talking about the points that stand out to them can be an awesome catalyst for spiritual growth. Take the time to allow them to wrestle with Bunyan's theology, recognizing that he was but a human trying to help other humans understand God's incredible, incomprehensible love.

## Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a *free* weekly email offering biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention](#)
- [Suicide Conversation Kit](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Depression & Anxiety](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to a Doubting Teen](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Discipling Teenagers](#)

## Additional Resources

- [The Pilgrim's Progress](#), free PDF from Desiring God
- ["5 Key Takeaways from Pilgrim's Progress,"](#) Haven Today
- ["Scenes of Grace – Lessons from The Pilgrim's Progress,"](#) Delivered by Grace
- ["Essential Lessons You and Your Teen will Learn from Pilgrim's Progress,"](#) Intoxicated on Life
- ["Christian Loses His Burden,"](#) Ligonier
- ["In the Dungeon of Giant Despair,"](#) Ligonier
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