

11-2015

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Recommended Citation

Standish, James (2015) "Pilgrims and Progress," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol9/iss2/11>

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Pilgrims and progress

James Standish

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I've never been a fan of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Yes, I know Samuel Johnson, one of the greatest literary figures in the English language, said "this is the great merit of [*The Pilgrims Progress*], that the most cultivated man cannot find anything to praise more highly, and the child knows nothing more amusing." And I know Ellen White called it a "wonderful allegory."

I know John Bunyan wrote it while suffering valiantly for religious freedom in prison. And I know it eloquently paints Protestant principles in a manner widely appreciated.

I know it's been translated into over 200 languages. And I know references to it literally litter the literary landscape.

And I like all of that.

It is the book itself I do not like.

It's just too dense and overwrought. I feel as burdened as the pilgrim himself as I read along. In comparison, the King James Bible makes for veritable light reading! And it's for that reason, I suppose, that I've never read *The Pilgrim's Progress* from start to finish. And it's been a very long time since I tried.

So when my children came home and announced Wahroonga Adventist School's musical this year was going to be based on *The Pilgrim's Progress*, my enthusiasm stemmed from a sense of parental duty, not personal pleasure.

I was rather chuffed when my oldest daughter scored a fairly large part in the production, until I realised that it would fall upon me to practice her lines with her. Spare me! Not only was I in for a nightly dose of *Pilgrim's Progress* – but precisely the same dose. Add dreariness to drudgery.

She asked me to come to the full dress rehearsal. Happily, I had work. And besides, my wife was going to be there. Surely it was better that just one of us should suffer.

And then the big night came. Wahroonga holds their concerts in the Hornsby RSL showroom. I don't know why. Now I love the country, the troops, the flag and I'm even more or less ok with the Queen. But I hate the RSL. Why? Because you have to file past all those filthy pokies where zombied adults sit throwing their gold away with one hand and throwing golden poison down their throats with their other. If ever you are feeling optimistic about the human condition, one

trip to the RSL will cure you.

The concert room was jammed packed with families when I arrived. Above on the right a portrait of Her Majesty. On the left a large white cross. I imagine the Queen might like a turn at the pokies – she likes a wager now and again. But I think Jesus would be more likely to go through the place with a whip, turning over thieving machines.

My daughter and her fellow actor walk on the stage. The show begins. The story unfolds. And not just story. This is a musical, with a full band, choirs, costumes. There's humour. Pathos. Tragedy. No one forgets their lines. Everyone is full of life. Every single child has a part. And for the first time. The very first time in my life. I feel the magic that is *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Mr. Worldly Wiseman? I have met that guy so many times in my life I can't count! I've met a few Hypocrisies over the years, too, and I've been one myself on more than one occasion. And, yep, I've had my share of Faithfuls in life – people who pulled me back onto the straight and narrow when I've stumbled. I've visited Vanity Fair and I've fallen desperately at the foot of the cross. All of it. I've got to tell you, that *Pilgrim's Progress* story? It is powerful stuff!

And that's when it hits me. My kids have been bathed in this "wonderful allegory" for months. They know the story backwards and forward. They can quote the lines. And sing the songs. And that's no coincidence. Their teachers have been praying and planning all year for just this result. What a beautiful thing this Christian education is!

The performance ends as it begins - flawless and amazing. The kids bring the house down. Parents, grandparents, friends and neighbours are on their feet cheering. Flashes are going off all over the hall. There's smiles and laughter, pictures and poses. This is what live theatre should feel like.

On the way out, we walk by the pokies. I glance over. "That's Vanity Fair," I say. "We know that, Dad," my youngest pipes up with just a hint of pre-adolescent weariness in her voice as if to say: "Don't you get it Dad. We've spent months mulling this story over. We know what it's about. We've got the lessons loud and clear. And we know exactly how to apply them in the real world."

That's the thing about that book *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I can't "praise it more highly. And my children have found nothing more amusing." **TEACH**

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