The Pilgrim’s Progress

How to Read Bunyan’s Allegory, Part 2
What is an Allegory?

• Our English word derives from the Greek word *allegorein*, meaning “to speak allegorically” and “to explain or denote allegorically.”

• It is formed from two Greek words: *allos* means “other,” while *agoreuo* means “to speak in a place of assembly.”

• The *agora* is the marketplace or place of assembly (e.g., *agoraphobia* is a fear of open places).
What is an Allegory?

• As a compound word, it came to mean a description of one thing (speaking about one thing) under the image of another.
• In other words, allegory is a form of extended metaphor, in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself.
• Beneath the apparent meaning of a story is concealed another, more important meaning.
An allegory is a *figure of speech*, “a mode of expression in which words are used out of their ordinary use in order to add beauty or emotional intensity or to transfer the poet’s sense impressions by comparing or identifying one thing with another that has a meaning familiar to the reader.”

- Author Unknown
The Definition Unfolded

1. In any figure of speech, the actual words are not to be interpreted literally (i.e., the story is not literally true). Matthew records that Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites because “you devour widows’ houses,” but obviously was not accusing these religious leaders of gathering around widows’ homes with forks in hand. “Hard is the quality of a stone, but when predicated of the heart, it is employed figuratively” (A.W. Pink).
2. Figures of speech may serve several purposes:
   a) To add *beauty* (rather than using plain, straightforward language).
   b) To add *emotional intensity* (to make the reader *feel* the story).
   c) To transfer the writer’s *sense perception* to the reader (by comparing one thing to another thing that is familiar to the reader).
d) To be a *means of concentration* (the writer may convey an image with the power of a few words rather than many which may be required otherwise).

Of the many figures of speech available to writers, Bunyan chose the allegory.
An allegory is an extended narrative, a story of events and experiences that stresses the details of plot, incident, and action.

In an allegory, the characters, events, and settings represent abstract qualities (e.g., Justice, a blindfolded woman holding scales; or Liberty, a woman wearing a diadem and holding a torch aloft).
The writer of an allegory fully intends that a second meaning be ready beneath the surface story. Allegory sustains interest on two levels: first, in the characters and actions described by the surface story; second, in the ideas symbolized by them.
Surface Story

Second Meaning
Dorothy Sayers

Allegory is the interpretation of experience by means of images. In its simplest form it is a kind of extended metaphor. Supposing we say: “John very much wanted to do so-and-so, but hesitated for fear of the consequences”; that is a plain statement. If we say: “In John’s mind desire and fear contended for the mastery,” we are already beginning to speak allegorically; John’s mind has become a field of battle in which two
personified emotions are carrying on a conflict. From this we can easily proceed to build up a full-blown allegory. We can represent the object of John’s ambition as a lady imprisoned in a castle, which is attacked by a knight called Desire and defended by a giant called Fear, and we can put in as much description of the place and people as will serve to make the story exciting. We can show Desire so badly battered by Fear
that he is discouraged and ready to give up, until rebuked by his squire, called Shame, who takes him to have his wounds dressed by a cheerful lady named Hope. Later, he is accosted by a plausible stranger called Suspicion, who says that the lady is much less virtuous and good-looking that she is made out to be...And so forth, introducing as many personifications of this kind as may be needed to express John’s successive
changes of mind. In this way we can work out quite a complicated psychological pattern, and at the same time entertain the reader with an exciting and colourful tale of adventure. In this purest kind of allegory, John himself never appears: his psyche is merely the landscape in which his personified feelings carry out their maneuvers. But there is also a form in which John himself – or what we may perhaps call
John’s conscious self, or super-self – figures among the personages of the allegory, as a pilgrim or knight-errant, exploring the wilderneses of his own soul and fighting against opposition both from within and without. The earlier part of *The Romance of the Rose* is an example of the first kind of allegory and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* of the second. In neither kind does the actual story pretend to be a relation
of fact; in its *literal* meaning, the whole tale is fiction; the *allegorical* meaning is the true story.
First Suggestion

Seek to discover why the allegory was written in the first place. Read *The Author’s Apology* to understand Bunyan’s motive for writing and publishing his work.
Second Suggestion

Read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* through once as a child would read, imposing nothing upon the story. Read to experience the full impact of the author’s specification. Lose yourself in the story. Abandon yourself to the process of taking the written word and recreating in your mind the world that Bunyan sub-created for that purpose.
Search out the basic points of comparison that Bunyan stressed. Let the allegory itself make these clear. Look for the emphasis put upon particular elements in the story (e.g., the burden on Christian’s back, Doubting Castle).
Fourth Suggestion

Always move into the book, not out of it. C.S. Lewis argues that “allegory gives you one thing in terms of another. All depends on respecting the rights of the vehicle, in refusing to allow the least confusion between the vehicle and its freight. The Foolish Virgins, with the parable, do not miss beatitude; they miss a wedding party. The Prodigal Son, when he comes home, is not given spiritual consolations; he is given new
Fourth Suggestion

clothes and the best dinner his father can put up. It is extraordinary how often this principle is disregarded. The imbecile, wisely anonymous, who illustrated my old nursery copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* makes a similar blunder at the end of Part II. Bunyan has been telling how a post came for Christiana to say that she was to cross the river and appear in the City within ten days. She made her farewells to all her friends
Fourth Suggestion

and ‘entered the River with a Beck’n’ (that is, a wave) of Fare well, to those that followed her to the River side. The artist has seen fit to illustrate this with a picture of an old lady on her death-bed, surrounded by weeping relatives in the approved Victorian manner. But if Bunyan had wanted a literal death-bed scene he would have written one.
Fourth Suggestion

“This stupidity perhaps comes from the pernicious habit of reading allegory as if it were a cryptogram to be translated; as if, having grasped what an image (as we say) ‘means,’ we threw the image away and thought of the ingredient in real life which it represents. But that method leads you continually out of the book back into the conception you started from and would have had without reading it. The
right process is the exact reverse. We ought not to be thinking ‘This green valley, where the shepherd boy is singing, represents humility’; we ought to be discovering, as we read, that humility is like that green valley. That way, moving always back into the book, not out of it, from the concept to the image, enriches the concept. And that is what allegory is for.”
The Right Process

Image $\rightarrow$ Concept

Concept $\rightarrow$ Image
Would you say, “The burden on Christian’s back represents sin,” or “How is sin like that burden on Christian’s back?”

Which one moves INTO the book?
Fifth Suggestion

Develop the total thought being presented. Study your Bible (e.g., What does the whole Bible say about sin?) to guard against fanciful interpretations of a specific point of comparison. Let’s God’s Word be the interpreter of The Pilgrim’s Progress, and not the other way around.
Now, reader, I have told my dream to thee; 
See if thou canst interpret it to me, 
Or to thyself, or neighbor: but take heed 
Of misinterpreting; for that, instead 
Of doing good, will but thyself abuse: 
By misunderstanding evil ensues.
Sixth Suggestion

Determine the appropriate applications for your life. Ask God to empower you to live out the truths you learn from Bunyan’s allegory which are substantiated by the Scriptures. Seek to understand why these truths are essential for godly living.