

FROM THE PASTOR'S PEN



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JOHN BUNYAN MEETS TEDDY ROOSEVELT

PASTOR TROY

I try to make sure that every year I read some old books by dead people. I'm reading Pilgrim's Progress once again, the classic Christian allegory by John Bunyan. The beginning of the book is always quite gripping one for me, for there we see Christian (the main character in the story) deciding to leave the safe, predictable life that he has constructed for himself in the town. His life has no real meaning or purpose and he is unable to find relief for the burden that he is constantly carrying on his back

He was visited by a character named Evangelist who instructs him to leave the life he knows and seek the life that can never be lost. In the book, Evangelist even gives him directions. As Christian runs off, two neighbors track him down, imploring him not to leave. Their names: Obstinate and Pliable. The names are always indicative of their character. Obstinate (being obstinate of course), can't believe Christian's intentions. Invited to join Christian on the journey, Obstinate replies: "What! And leave our friends and our comforts behind us!" Pliable (being by definition easily influenced or persuaded) is quickly convinced by Christian's argument to pursue true joy and trudges along with him. However, almost immediately, they both fall into "the Slough of Despond" (a mud pit of despair). Pliable, again quickly influenced by circumstances, cries out, "Is this the happiness you have told me all this while of?" And he crawls out of the pit and goes back home.

Christian refuses to go back, or give up, despite the weight of the burden that is still on his back, and flails away in the pit until he eventually is rescued by a man named "Help" who puts him on his way again.

What I love about this interchange is that all this happens in the first 7 pages of a 278 page book. In 7 pages Obstinate and Pliable give up, desiring comfort and safety. And they are not privy to the next 271 pages of the journey Christian embarks on – a joyful, yet incredibly difficult journey. They desire no journey. They like life "just the way things are." The interchange also reminds me of the great quote by Teddy Roosevelt, another dead person, which I have drawn strength from countless times in my own journey:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how

the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly. So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

What haunts me are the words "those cold timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." That's Obstinate, that's Pliable. That's the fool in the book of Proverbs. At times that's been me. Yet, I've been more disgusted with myself in those moments than any painful defeat I've experienced. I'm no longer attracted to that anymore. I desire to do what Paul instructs – to look back no longer and press on ahead to a life of God-soaked journeys through mountains and valleys. I don't want the comfort that Obstinate idolizes. I also no longer want safety that Pliable demands. I know, that whatever sloughs come my way – the sloughs of despond, or adversity, or pressure, etc., will be met with "Help" from God. Failure no longer scares me – timidity, on the other hand, terrifies me. Standing still, to me, is slow death.

Obstinate and Pliable go back home and become the "critics" once again – the ones who point out where others stumble, ones who mock those who take risks of faith. Christian goes on to the "arena" where his face is quite literally "marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly." Yet, in the end, he knows more joy than he thought possible. The next 271 pages are worth the read – and worth the pondering.

How about you? Are you who you want to be? Are you content with 7 pages? Live Philippians 3:12-14.