

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

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One Pilgrim's Progress Philippians 2: 5-8

He was an unlikely candidate to become one of the most famous and memorable Christians of all time. He grew up poor and ignorant, vulgar, foul-mouthed and, by his own admission, dismissive of all things religious. To his amazement, he fell in love with and married a Godly woman whose example awakened in him a spiritual hunger. But John Bunyan was acutely aware of his rough-hewn unrighteousness, and the notion that such an unworthy scoundrel as he could be affirmed by God was extremely puzzling. But he came to realize that God's acceptance of him was based upon the righteousness of Christ, not his own, and so he embraced God's amazing grace and became a committed Christian.

John Bunyan felt not only called to profess Christ as Savior, but to preach God's Good News. He began preaching to several small Baptist congregations that met in houses. Here was the problem: the British government required all preachers to be approved by the Church of England and licensed by the government. Baptist John Bunyan didn't believe that Anglicans or the British government should meddle in a matter that was rightly the prerogative of God. So Bunyan disregarded the state's licensing procedures and preached anyway. He was instantly jailed. Authorities explained to him that all he needed to do to gain freedom was become licensed by the state church. But John Bunyan believed that the principles of religious liberty and soul competency were too important to be compromised. So he stayed in jail. *For twelve years he stayed in jail.*

John Bunyan was imprisoned from 1660 to 1672. Periodically, authorities implored him to change his mind, but he wouldn't. He hated the separation from his wife and children, but he used his time wisely. This illiterate man began to educate himself and finally began to write a novel about a man who went through life asking the question, "What must I do to be saved?" His book quickly became one of the most successful and best-loved works in English literature. We know it as *Pilgrim's Progress*. The popularity of the book and Bunyan's fame moved the British government to cease imprisoning Bunyan and helped convince government authorities to practice toleration of faiths that dissented from the norm – which Baptist usually do. Though it cost him much of a lifetime, John Bunyan's testimony helped establish the principle of religious liberty for future generations.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we pause to remember and honor those who regarded life as that which was to be poured out for others. We think of soldiers who accepted their truncated life spans as the price that some must pay for the liberty of all. We think of our Lord, who as our Supper attests, poured himself out that we might know the gracious and accepting nature of God. Indeed, on this Memorial Day, we engage in a memorial meal that calls to intense remembrance of the self-giving nature of God's love that invites us to unite our lives with the ceaselessly transforming purposes of the Kingdom. But on this Memorial Day, it is also appropriate to think of an obscure Baptist minister who believed that the principle of liberty warranted not simply a single act of sacrifice, but a lifetime of hardship. Not for an evening, but for twelve years John Bunyan accepted the encumbrance of prison as the price to be paid for helping create the legacy of a free church in a free state. Through this meal we acknowledge that our redemption was not cheaply won. Through this weekend we acknowledge that our political freedom was purchased at the cost of others' ultimate sacrifice. So, too, our religious freedom was established by the fortitude of saints. This weekend, let us dine in a spirit of gratitude for soldiers, servants and our Savior, living with a commitment to courage, inspired by vigilant remembrance of those who have poured out their lives on our behalf.

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Communion Sunday, May 28, 2006
Memorial Day Weekend