

BIOGRAPHY ON JOHN BUNYAN

AUTHOR OF PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

The book, Pilgrim's Progress, written in 1678, has been considered the most important and best selling Christian book of all time next to sacred Scripture. Translated into over 200 languages, this allegory of the Christian life is second to the Bible in its circulation across the globe, and has earned John Bunyan a place among the "literary immortals."

Prominent spiritual giants of today and the past have recognized this book for its practical Biblical influence. [Ravi Zacharias](#), one of today's great Christian leaders, says of the classic, "*The Pilgrim's Progress is a masterpiece. . . . It is, outside of the Bible, the best piece of work that 'reads the reader.'* To see your heart revealed in a book and to stand bowed before the Cross is the most compelling experience one can accept from a book." Charles Spurgeon and George Whitfield both said the Pilgrim's Progress was the best and most important book for the Christian, apart from the Bible. Spurgeon read the book over 100 times in his life, which lasted only 54 years. Therefore, if he learned to read at age 4, then he would have had to read it twice a year for the rest of his life. Reading Pilgrim's Progress helps us understand more about why Spurgeon had the simple and clear ability to impact people with his preaching. In his life Spurgeon applauded Bunyan for his Scripture soaked life with the following words:

"Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like the reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress — that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere — his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved."

The purpose of this series is to read, understand, and apply the Biblical truths in this Christian classic, which has been heralded as the most influential literary book ever written, second to the Scripture. It is the story of a man who comes to read a book, in which he learns that he is a citizen of the great City of Destruction, from which he must flee to be saved. The enormous burden on his back presses upon him to the point where he seeks relief from his guilt – a quest that starts at the narrow wicket gate and begins a path that leads to the Celestial City. Pilgrim's Progress is an account of this man's journey.

And yet, to properly understand this book, we must first begin with a more careful appreciation of its author – a most unlikely person to write the most influential and helpful Christian book ever. John Bunyan, of whom it was said by George Cheever, biographer and commentator on Bunyan and his work, was the "great circumnavigator in

the Divine Life” had humble beginnings. Born in a village named Elstow, about a mile south of Bedford, England November 30, 1628, John Bunyan entered into the world in an age of great political turmoil and revolution. Bunyan’s life would span the extremes of good and evil, piety and wickedness, and tyranny and oppression – all of which would be mixed and poured into a cup that Bunyan would drink throughout his life.

As a child in a peasant home, Bunyan received a meager education – the ability to read and write, but never formal training of any kind. His father was a “tinker” someone who repaired pots and pans, and imparted the skill to his son, which he adopted as his own trade. Bunyan considered his own childhood home to be “*of a rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families in the land.*” Regarding his life as an unbeliever, from childhood on, Bunyan said:

“As for my own natural life, for the time that I was without God in the world....both in my heart and life, and that from a child, that I had but few equals, especially considering my years, which were tender, being few, both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God.

Yea, so settled and rooted was I in these things, that they became as a second nature to me; the which, as I also have with soberness considered since, did so offend the Lord, that even in my childhood He did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrify me with dreadful visions; for often, after I had spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my bed been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits, who still, as I then thought, labored to draw me away with them, of which I could never be rid.

Also I should, at these years, be greatly afflicted and troubled with the thoughts of the day of judgment, and that both night and day, and should tremble at the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell fire; still fearing that it would be my lot to be found at last amongst those devils and hellish fiends, who are there bound down with the chains and bonds of eternal darkness, 'unto the judgment of the great day.'

These things, I say, when I was but a child but nine or ten years old, did so distress my soul, that when in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down and afflicted in my mind therewith, yet could I not let go my sins. Yea, I was also then so overcome with despair of life and heaven, that I should often wish either that there had been no hell, or that...I might be rather a tormentor, than be tormented myself.

A while after, these terrible dreams did leave me, which also I soon forgot; for my pleasures did quickly cut off the remembrance of them, as if they had never been: wherefore, with more greediness, according to the strength of nature, I did still let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in

all transgression against the law of God: so that, until I came to the state of marriage, I was the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness.

Yea, such prevalency had the lusts and fruits of the flesh in this poor soul of mine, that had not a miracle of precious grace prevented, I had not only perished by the stroke of eternal justice, but had also laid myself open, even to the stroke of those laws, which bring some to disgrace and open shame before the face of the world.”

Bunyan loved his sin, but was terrorized by the thought of God. His real suffering began in 1644, when he was only 15 years old, his mother and 13 year old sister died within a month of each other. Further adding to his grief, his father remarried within a month. At the age of 16, Bunyan was drafted into the Parliamentary Army, where he served two years away from home, and on one occasion recalls narrowly escaping death. A man who traded places with him in the line of battle was struck in the head with a musket and killed, an incident on which Bunyan would later reflect, *“Here, as I said, were judgments and mercy, but neither of them did awaken my soul to righteousness; wherefore I sinned still, and grew more and more rebellious against God, and careless of mine own salvation.”*

John Bunyan married a woman whose name is assumed to be Mary, the daughter of a godly man who left her two books, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*, which they read together, but which had little to no effect on Bunyan. Together, he and Mary bore four children: Mary, Elizabeth, John and Thomas. Mary, the oldest, was born blind.

Attending church together as a family, and listening to a sermon on keeping the Sabbath, Bunyan again felt the heaviness of reproach on his soul. Whereas Bunyan had experienced guilt before, on one occasion, he recounts having one of his first moments of real conviction:

“But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game at cat, and having struck it one blow from the hole, just as I was about to strike it the second time, a voice did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul, which said, Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell? At this I was put to an exceeding maze; wherefore, leaving my cat upon the ground, I looked up to heaven, and was as if I had, with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if He did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these and my other ungodly practices.

Thus I stood in the midst of my play, before all that then were present; but yet I told them nothing: but I say, I having made this conclusion, I returned desperately to my sport again; and I well remember,

that presently this kind of despair did so possess my soul, that I was persuaded I could never attain to other comfort than what I should get in sin; for heaven was gone already, so that on that I must not think; wherefore I found within me a great desire to take my fill of sin, still studying what sin was set to be committed, that I might taste the sweetness of it; and I made as much haste as I could to fill my belly with its delicates, lest I should die before I had my desire; for that I feared greatly.”

John Bunyan had two priorities: live as long as he could and enjoy as much sin as he possibly could while he lived. Soon after this, Bunyan met an old, poor man whose love for the Bible and devotion Bunyan admired greatly. This man read to him the Pauline epistles and the historical portions of Scripture, which led him to make, as he called it, “outward reformation” and lived for more than a year in Pharisaic piety. Those who knew Bunyan were astonished and actually called him a godly man. He remarked, “*I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite, yet I loved to be talked of as one that was truly godly. I was proud of my godliness, and, I did all I did, either to be seen of, or to be well spoken of, by man....But, poor wretch as I was, I was all this while ignorant of Jesus Christ, and going about to establish my own righteousness; and had perished therein, had not God, in mercy, showed me more of my state of nature.*” He was still lost, but God was not done with Him!

Bunyan’s conversion was a grueling and agonizing experience for him. He found himself parting with former friends whose influence was desperately wicked. He started reading and loving the Bible. He even began refuting false doctrine. But internally he found himself tormented about the raging blasphemies in his own heart towards God. Fearing he had committed the unpardonable sin over and over again, Bunyan wondered if he could ever be saved. Then it happened,

“One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, ‘The same yesterday, today, and forever.’ Heb. 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.”

His pastor, John Gifford, was extremely influential in Bunyan's life, especially in his clear teaching on the doctrine of justification. John Bunyan moved his family from Elstow to Bedford, in order to sit and learn under Pastor Gifford, whose example of faithful ministry Bunyan would follow.

Still a layman and working as a tinker in his late 20's, when asked to fill the pulpit in 1655, the clear calling of God on Bunyan's became evident as he began to preach and teach the Bible. Though he would not be licensed as a pastor of the Bedford church for another 17 years, his giftedness drew the attention of countless numbers. Reports of crowds near the size of 1200 people gathered to listen to Bunyan preach at 7:00AM on a weekday morning.

John Owen, when asked by King Charles II why he, a great scholar, went to hear an uneducated tinker preach said, *"May it please your Majesty, could I possess the tinker's ability for preaching, I would willingly relinquish all my learning."* And again, *"I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's hearts."*

In 1658, his childhood experiences were repeated when his own wife of 10 years died, leaving him with four children under the age of 10. Bunyan would remarry a brave and godly woman named Elizabeth, who would bear three more children: a baby who died at birth, Sarah and Joseph.

It was the year after they were married that Bunyan would enter the greatest test of his faith ever – he would be imprisoned for preaching the Gospel. During this time, political upheaval and religious unrest led to serious shifts in power within the British government. One of the severest difficulties centered on the role of church and state and the freedom of religion. The beheading of the King and the death of Oliver Cromwell led to the rise in power of King Charles II, who opposed any churches not sanctioned by the state and whose power resulted in the ejection and imprisonment of many faithful pastors who were labeled "Non-conformists" for their refusal to compromise preaching. On one August day in 1662, two years after Bunyan's imprisonment began, 2,000 pastors were ejected from their pulpits on what is commonly called "Black Sunday."

November of 1660 began what was supposed to be a three month sentence for preaching, but 3 months turned into 12 years. At home, Bunyan had a nine-month pregnant wife and four children when he was arrested for preaching and counseling with the Bible. The kicker was this: he could leave any time he desired, if he would promise to stop preaching Christ. But he was unwilling. Add to that the fact that within days of being arrested, the duress on his wife brings causes her to birth a child that dies. While that child lies in its casket, his wife is so distraught over Bunyan's arrest and this dead child that she cannot even get out of her chair.

The care of the family is left to the oldest child, a daughter named Mary, who is blind. Mary and one of her little brothers take the only food in the home and bring it to their father in jail. Bunyan sits in a jail that is run by a gruff, harsh man who despises

Bunyan's praying, and who threatens his children from allowing them to show their father any mercy.

Everyday he wonders if the next day might be his last, as men who had done less than him were being executed throughout the land. The clouds of despondency loomed over Bunyan's head as thoughts of second guessing for the pain caused to his family led him to battle with thoughts of suicide.

All of this in the first week – only 623 weeks to go! Could you imagine being arrested at the age of 32 as was Bunyan, and not being released until you are 44 and to live in the same cell in those unbearable conditions for 4,380 days? He spends 12 years in a cell that was black and muggy in the summer, so that mildew spread all over the walls and cold in the winter, so that he shivered in his cell, alone.

Bunyan recalls the visits his children made to the jail, and his immense emotional heaving after they were forced to leave. *"Oh the parting of with my wife and children is as the pulling of the flesh from my bones. What hardships, and miseries, and wants, my poor family are likely to meet with, if I am taken from them; especially my poor blind child, who is nearer to my heart than all beside. Oh! The hardships that this poor blind one will have to undergo will break my heart to pieces."*

When Bunyan was in prison, he would often try to hide the fact that he was bawling from his blind daughter Mary, who it is said, would feel his face, and if she found any tears, kiss them all away. His family brought him food while he worked hard at making shoe laces, so they could sell them and buy bread to take to their father in prison, just so he could eat. Meanwhile, back in the village, the government ravaged what was left of Bunyan's flock, fining people with immense sums of money, sometimes coming to their homes with a cart and taking away everything they owned: furniture, clothing, and cooking utensils, leaving these believers with literally nothing. One woman from that era reported, *"They carried away all the Goods in her House they thought worth their labor, as Tables, Cupboards, Chairs, Irons, Feather-beds, Blankets, the very Hangings of the Room, and Sheets off [their] bed, insomuch that [a] Widow was forced that night to borrow sheets of her Neighbors to lie on."*

Can you imagine the temptation to compromise? Can you imagine the fear, the worry, and the desperation? Could you imagine keeping your sanity in a trial like this? Add to this, a fellow prisoner in the cell nearby, whose drowning despair nearly pulled Bunyan under as well. Imagine, having to deal with your own worst nightmare, which you have the ability to relieve at any moment! You can get out any time you want to, if you compromise.

His dear wife pleaded for her husband's release over and over, to no avail. Of the many visits to the magistrates, and in appeal for a fair trial, the following account tells us something of her great courage. Elizabeth before the counsel:

"Would he stop preaching?"

"My lord, he dares not leave off preaching as long a he can speak."

"What is the need of talking?"

"There is need for this, my lord, for I have four small children that cannot help themselves, of which one is blind, and we have nothing to live upon but the charity of good people."

Matthew Hale with pity asks if she really has four children being so young.

"My lord, I am but mother-in-law to them, having not been married to him yet full two years. Indeed, I was with child when my husband was first apprehended; but being young and unaccustomed to such things, I being smayed at the news, fell into labor, and so continued for eight days, and then was delivered; but my child died."

Hale was moved, but other judges were hardened and spoke against him. "He is a mere tinker!"

"Yes, and because he is a tinker and a poor man, therefore he is despised and cannot have justice."

One Mr. Chester is enraged and says that Bunyan will preach and do as he wishes.

"He preacheth nothing but the word of God!" she says.

Mr. Twisden, in a rage: "He runneth up and down and doeth harm."

"No, my lord, it is not so; God hath owned him and done much good by him."

The angry man: "His doctrine is the doctrine of the devil."

She: "My lord, when the righteous Judge shall appear, it will be known that his doctrine is not the doctrine of the devil!"

Twelve years he stayed in that prison, serving two sentences of six years each. He was rearrested after his first release for preaching the Gospel, against the mandate of the state. During his first imprisonment, he poured over two books: the Bible and Fox's Book of Martyr's. Of all the verses most meaningful to him, Bunyan wrote of 1 Peter 1:8, *"Jesus Christ was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen and felt him indeed...I pray that he may stand by me and uphold me, if it is his will to send me to this horrid place...I have had the sweet sights of the forgiveness of my sins in this place, and my being with Jesus in another world. Jesus has been sweet to me in this place. I have seen...here, that I am persuaded that I shall never, while in this world be able to express... a truth in this Scripture, 'Whom having not seen, ye love, in whom though now you see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.'"*

During his second imprisonment, he took up his pen and began to write pamphlets and tracts that would feed his flock, in addition to five books – which were reportedly read by thousands. In fact, the great blessing of this era of immense persecution is that most of the ejected pastors wrote books that remain to this day, which have encouraged believers since then. During this time, his blind daughter Mary became so dear to him, as she would spend long hours with her dad, resting her frail frame against her dad, while he prayed for her, and even pleaded with her to know Christ for herself, as she came of age where the eternal realities of the Gospel were now clearer than ever. His highest joy was leading Mary to salvation which is in Christ Jesus, from the prison cell.

On occasion, because of his faithfulness in prison, the heart of the night guard was opened to let Bunyan out to see his family and feed his flock, just so long as he promised

to return again. Word got out to his scattered flock, *“Our pastor will be let out tonight and will meet us in the forest, until just before daybreak.”* The jailer risked himself, because as news of Bunyan’s occasional releases spread, the jailer was threatened time and again with threats against his own life and job. Bunyan would remain faithful until the day of his release in 1672, where he immediately returned not only to his family, but also to his pastorate where he continued to preach and minister.

When Bunyan was released, he wrote about it, thanking God for the prison because it made him trust the Omnipotent Eye that watched his children travel home in the cold evenings, the Omnipotent Hand that would protect his family from every danger; and above all, in that cell he *“learned to live upon God who is invisible.”* When no one else stood with him, John Bunyan knew the invisible God, who could slip through the bars of the jail and whisper sweet comfort into his soul; who could teach Bunyan things that made the most learned men envious; who could soothe Bunyan with accents of love that no earthly person would provide; and who could put Himself on display in such a way that He might never have been seen and cherished were it not for the prison.

Again in 1675, the political winds blew a different direction, and Bunyan was imprisoned for a third time, for about six months, during which it is believed he wrote the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the most notable of his 58 books. George Whitefield said of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *“It smells of the prison. It was written when the author was confined in Bedford jail. And ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross: the Spirit of Christ and of Glory then rests upon them.”*

From the time Bunyan was released, the grief in his heart would deepen and continue, since the climate against religious persecution was still unfriendly towards believers. Bunyan was falsely accused on heinous sins and crimes, not the least of which was a plot to poison and murder a well-respected townsman, though he had no connection with the man whatsoever. Reflecting on the accusations, slanders, and suspicions of his detractors, Bunyan only offered this:

“To all which, I shall only say, God knows that I am innocent. But as for mine accusers, let them provide themselves to meet me before the tribunal of the Son of God, there to answer for these things, with all the rest of their iniquities, unless God shall give them repentance for them, for the which I pray with all my heart.

So, then, what shall I say to those that have thus bespattered me? Shall I threaten them? Shall I chide them? Shall I flatter them? Shall I entreat them to hold their tongues? No, not I, were it not for that these things make them ripe for damnation, that are the authors and abettors, I would say unto them, Report it, because it will increase my glory.

Therefore I bind these lies and slanders to me as an ornament, it belongs to my Christian profession to be vilified, slandered, reproached and reviled; and since all this is nothing else, as my God and my

conscience do bear me witness, I rejoice in reproaches for Christ's sake....My foes have missed their mark in this their shooting at me."

Near the end of Bunyan's life, his heart would break the hardest, as he would be forced to bury his blind daughter, whose grief was beyond comfort. Mary, when she had come of age, drew the affection of a young William Dormer – a friend who cared for her and her family from childhood. Williams and Mary were engaged to be married, when William, who stood for religious liberty in England, was arrested, tried, sentenced, and imprisoned like her father, and then executed. Mary never recovered from the grief. Her suffering overtook her frail frame and ended her life. Holding her cold hand on her death bed, her faithful father, John Bunyan rehearsed the truths of Scripture to her. She is recorded uttering the following, with her final, shallow breaths:

"I know these words are true: He will never leave me nor forsake me. I once dreaded death, but now I find it has no sting. Jesus has removed it by suffering for me. I long to go to be with Him, where I shall see Him as He is...it is a glorious thought, father, that these poor eyes that have long been sealed, shall there see the King in His beauty. Oh how I long to go!"

"It will not be long, my child" said the father, in a broken voice.

"Not long, father. I already seem to be going" she said, and with final utterance says, "Come Lord Jesus, come quickly."

The daughter he had loved and begotten faded from his hands into the place where he would soon depart and join her at the Savior's side. John Piper details the events of Bunyan's final days of August, 1688:

"He traveled the 50 miles to London to preach and to help make peace between a man in his church and his alienated father. He was successful in both missions. But after a trip to an outlying district, he returned to London on horseback, through excessive rains. He fell sick of a violent fever, and on August 31, 1688, at age 60, followed his Pilgrim from the city of Destruction across the river to the New Jerusalem. His last sermon had been on August 19 in London at Whitechapel on John 1:13. His last words from the pulpit were, "Live like the children of God, that you may look your Father in the face with comfort another day." His wife and children were probably unaware of the crisis till after it was too late. So Bunyan probably died without the comfort of family – just as he had spent so much of his life without the comforts of home. "The inventory of Bunyan's property after his death added up to a total of 42 pounds and 19 shillings. This is more than

the average tinker would leave, but it suggests that most of the profits from The Pilgrim's Progress had gone to printers of pirated editions." He was born poor and never let himself become wealthy in this life. He is buried in London at Bunhill Fields.

John Bunyan is among the greatest heroes of the Christian faith, and has a place in the church history faith hall of fame. As you consider his life, don't draw comfort *merely* from the limit of your testing compared to his. Resist placing hope in the freedom of religion that you enjoy. Refuse to pity him for his trials, for he does not. Above all, resist venerating the man for his spiritual and literary example. Instead, see in his heart, the work of sovereign grace that makes lost, sinful, hardened rebels into steadfast, immovable, faithful servants who treasure Christ more than life itself, and who ever life to know Him and make Him known. Learn like Bunyan "to live upon God that is invisible."

Required Reading for Pilgrim's Progress Class

Cheryl Ford, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Wheaton: Tyndale), 1991.

Recommended Books for Further Reading:

George Cheever, *Cheever's Lectures on the Pilgrim's Progress and on the Life and Times of John Bunyan* (New York: William Osborne Printer) 1846.

Cheryl Ford, *The Pilgrim's Progress Devotional* (Wheaton: Crossway), 1998.

Sallie Rochester Ford, *Mary Bunyan: The Dreamer's Blind Daughter* (Choteau: Old Paths Gospel Press), 1860.

John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books), 2001.