

John Bunyan – Author of Pilgrims Progress

1) Bunyan's Life Prior to His Conversion:

- John was born to Thomas and Margaret Bunyan in November, 1628 at Elstow, a little village about a mile south of Bedford in Bedfordshire, England. No record exists stating his exact birth date however his name was entered in the Baptismal register of the Elstow Parish Church on November 30, 1628.

- Very little is known about Bunyan's early years. We do know that John grew up in very humble circumstances. His family struggled with poverty during his growing up years. However, his parents were able to send him to school. Bunyan later wrote "It pleased God to put into their hearts to put me to school, to learn me both to read and to write."

- In 1644, his mother died and within two months his father remarried. On his 16th birthday, John joined the Parliamentary Army. His name appears on the muster rolls of the garrison at Newport Pagnell commanded by Sir Samuel Luke, a well known Parliamentary commander. He served from November 30, 1644 to June 17, 1647.

- Two years after his discharge from the Army he married his first wife. No record of their marriage date has been found and the name of his first wife is unknown. Concerning his first wife John later wrote, "It was my mercy to light upon a wife whose father and mother were counted godly. This woman and I, though we came together as poor as poor might be (not having so much household stuff as a dish or soon betwixt us both), yet this she had for her part, "The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven", and "The Practice of Piety", which her father had left her when he died. In these two books I sometimes read." We know that four children were born by John's first wife - Mary who was born blind, John, Elizabeth and Thomas. To support himself and his family John took up the trade that his father Thomas had and that was to make and mend pots and kettles (a Tinker). His first wife died in 1655

-Bunyan describes that in these early years it was his delight "to be taken captive by the devil at his will, being filled with all unrighteousness." He wrote that he had few equals for his years "both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God". His profanity became so bad that even openly wicked people were shocked when they heard him speak. He recalled that one day an evil woman of the town advised his companions to not keep company with John or he would make them as bad as himself. She said that "he was the ungodliest fellow for swearing that even she heard in all her life, and that by thus doing, he was able to spoil all of the youth of the whole town, if they came in his company".

- Though Bunyan's life was marked by such things outwardly, his conscience often afflicted him even depriving him of sleep. He recalled that that even while nine or ten years of age he was so distressed in his soul that he often wished "either there be no hell, or that I had been a devil, supposing they were only tormenters". So conscious did he become of his own ungodliness that he was brought to the point where he believed that he had passed the point of no return and that Christ would not forgive him of his sins. He wrote, "My state is surely miserable; miserable if I leave my sins, and but miserable if I follow them. I can be but damned, and, if I must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins, as be damned for a few".

2) Bunyan's Conversion:

- In God's providence the Lord brought certain individuals into Bunyan's life whose witness eventually led him to the Lord.

- His first wife read with John the two books that her father had given to her often mentioning her father's godly conversation and did so in the hope that her profane husband would be made ashamed of his own words and conduct.

- Bunyan mentions that shortly after his marriage, he met a poor man who had a long conversation with him concerning the Scriptures and this led to him reading it and reading it with pleasure. He was especially interested in the historical parts. He set the commandments before him as a way to heaven. At this time a considerable outward change took place in him which caused his neighbors much amazement and began to speak well of him both to his face and behind his back. Bunyan later wrote recalling this time, "Now I was, as they said, becoming godly; now I was becoming a right honest man; but oh, when I understood these were their

words and opinion of me it pleased me well, for although as yet 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 indeed I did all that I did either to be seen of or to be well spoken of by men, and thus I continued for about twelve months, or more ... I knew not Christ, nor grace, nor faith, nor hope, for as I have well seen since, had I then died my state had been most fearful.”

- Bunyan continued in this self-righteous state until one memorable day when, while attending to his tinkering business in Bedford he overheard three women conversing about spiritual things. Here are his words:

“This morning as I went through Bedford, intent upon my calling, it was my lot that I should pass through one of the streets that are nigh the High Street. There sat three poor women in the sun, and as they talked in the doorway I heard some of their speech. I drew nigh to listen; but alas! ‘twas such talk as I had never dreamed of before! They spoke of a new birth, of how God had worked in their hearts to show them of their lost state, of how they were once under the curse of God for their guilt and iniquity; and then they spoke comfortably of the loving-kindness of God in giving his dear Son to die for them, and how they had been led to trust Christ, and found in him peace and rest for their souls. Me thought that is what I much want, yet how to obtain it I knew not. Then they talked of how God had visited them and refreshed them. It seemed to me as if they were in another world far above me; but when they talked about their temptations, me thought I knew what they meant, at least in some degree. Yet they had declared that they had oftentimes gotten the victory and all through the Word of God. Me thought this is indeed news to me. I was struck all a-dumb at their wisdom, yet it was sweet to me, like the droppings of the honeycomb. And when I opened my mind to them they made no mock of my distress, nor did they make light of it, but bade me come the next day to talk to their teacher, one Dr. Gifford, and by God’s grace I went to him.”

Bunyan sat under John Gifford’s faithful ministry which met at St. John’s Church for nearly two and a half difficult years. During this time he was blessed with periods of faith and hope, and other times found himself in the depths of despondency. Finally at the end of this time as he was walking in a field the words “Thy righteousness is in heaven” came to his mind and he said “I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God’s right hand - there, I say, is my righteousness, and today, and forever”.

- In 1653 Bunyan was received into the nonconformist congregation after being baptized by immersion in the Great River Ouse. In 1655 he became a deacon in the church and it was then that he began to preach. In 1656 John Gifford died and was replaced by John Barton.

- Shortly after the death of Bunyan’s first wife, “as soon as was proper”, he married Elizabeth. She was a friend of his first wife, who cared for his children during her final days. Elizabeth greatly admired John and had great love and pity for his children. They had two children together, Sarah and Joseph.

- Bunyan was now an intense student of the Scriptures. He spent much time traveling from village to village preaching. It was his delight and privilege to be given the opportunity to preach and he would do it anywhere and everywhere; in barns, the open air, in private houses and occasionally in parish churches to the benefit and great blessing of many people. It was however this drive and desire to preach the gospel everywhere that eventually got him into trouble.

3) Bunyan’s Arrest and Imprisonment

- In 1660 when the Commonwealth government fell and King Charles 11 assumed the throne, he soon broke his promise to allow freedom of worship in Britain and it again became illegal to preach or to hold religious services apart from the established church. John Bunyan was one of the first to suffer as a dissenter.

- In October of 1660 the justices of Bedford used an old law that was passed under the reign of Elizabeth 1 that the liturgy of the Church of England must be publicly read at all religious services. Bunyan refused saying that “he would not pray after the form of men’s inventions”. As a consequence, a warrant was issued by the Justice of the Peace, Francis Wingate, for the arrest of John Bunyan for unlawfully preaching and assembling the people together.

- On the evening of November 12, 1660, in the small village of Samsell, about 13 miles south of Bedford, a small group of men and women gathered in a farm house to hear Bunyan preach. When Bunyan arrived for

the meeting he was informed by the owner of the house that a warrant was out for his arrest. After being advised to cancel the meeting on account of the warrant, Bunyan replied,

“I will by no means stir, neither will I have the meeting dismissed for this. Oh Brother, come, be of good cheer; let us not be daunted; our cause is good, we need not be ashamed of it. To preach God’s word is so good a work that we shall be rewarded if we suffer for that.”

Bunyan then stepped out into the courtyard as they waited for a few more to arrive. Once the time came that the meeting was to begin, Bunyan entered the room where the people were gathered and opened with a word of prayer. No sooner had he finished praying than a loud knock came at the door. The door was then opened and two men entered the room: the country constable and a servant of Justice Wingate. They showed Bunyan the warrant for his arrest and ordered him to come with them. Before leaving he said to those gathered,

“We are prevented, you see, brethren, of an opportunity to speak and to hear the Word of God, and are likely to suffer for the same. But be not discouraged my dear brethren; it is mercy to suffer on so good an account. We might have been apprehended as thieves or murderers or for other wickedness; but blessed be God it is not so. We suffer as Christians for well doing, and we had better be the persecuted than the persecutors.”

- The next day Bunyan appeared before Justice Wingate. When two of Bunyan’s friends offered bail money, Bunyan refused to accept their kind offer on account that he was ordered not to preach if he was released. Bunyan stated, “I dare not leave off that which God has called me to do”. And so he was sent to prison and remained there for twelve years for refusing to stop preaching the Word of God. Bunyan could have obtained his liberty at any time had he expressed his willingness to conform to the Church of England and cease from his preaching.

- While in prison he was allowed to keep with him his Bible, a copy of the book “Foxes Book of Martyrs” and materials for writing. During his long imprisonment he gave himself to writing books, pamphlets and personal letters to those outside of the prison. One writer commented,

“The prison was the university in which he found opportunity to study and promote the happiness of all Christ’s pilgrims. A pilgrim guide fitted for every clime, and kindred, and tongue, and people. Here he was sheltered from the persecution that raged without. Here he found peaceful leisure and nearness of access to the throne of grace, the gate of heaven. Thence came that divine wisdom which fitted him for this important work.”

- While Bunyan was in prison, believers in England suffered harassment, fines, loss of property and imprisonment for illegally assembling together for worship. Bunyan encouraged them by sending letters from prison, and by his example the believers in Bedfordshire were comforted and emboldened to persevere.

- By the end of 1671, the magistrates had grown weary of hassling the Non-Conformists. Persecution only made the rulers the subject of much scorn and ridicule by the people. They became more and more disliked and openly mocked for their treatment of those who peaceably gathered to worship God as their own conscience dictated. So, although these gatherings were still unlawful, church members were able to gather together for their meetings without being interfered with.

On January 21, 1672, the congregation at Bedford appointed John Bunyan to be their pastor, to which, though still in prison, he gladly accepted. Other men who proved steadfast under persecution during this time were appointed to other church offices as well.

- In March of 1672, King Charles II obtained a large sum of money from the King of France and felt himself at that point strong enough to do without parliament and so he dissolved it. Upon doing so, to show favor to the Roman Catholics, he issued the Declaration of Indulgence which forbade persecution to anyone for their religious beliefs. Though aimed at the Catholics, the non-conformists benefited too, and Bunyan walked out of jail a free man.

4) Bunyan’s Final Years

Upon release from prison, Bunyan and other church leaders at once set about to finding a place where

the Bedford congregation could meet comfortably. One of the church members owned a large barn with much room in it and it was chosen to be the first meeting place of what is now the Bedford Baptist Church. The present day church building is built on that very site. Bunyan was not only concerned for his own congregation but for all those scattered throughout the villages in the surrounding area. He helped these congregations find meeting places and assisted in finding honest, godly, gifted men to pastor these churches.

- Bunyan came to be known in Bedfordshire as "Bishop Bunyan". He could be found riding from village to village preaching at farms and in the market places and other public meeting areas. For the rest of his life he continued writing and preaching. He frequently visited London as well and there were on many occasions as many as 3000 people who came to hear what the released prisoner had to say. His fame even reached King Charles 11 and on one occasion when the King ridiculed John Owen for going to hear an "illiterate tinker prate", Owen replied, "May it please your Majesty, could I possess that tinker's ability for preaching, I would most gladly relinquish all my learning."

- In 1675, Parliament again convened and overturned King Charles 11 Declaration of Indulgence stating that he had acted illegally. Bunyan again was prohibited by law from preaching, but he continued to preach anyway. Consequently he was imprisoned again for six months. It was during this six month imprisonment that he began to write the book which he originally entitled "The Strait Gate: The Way and Race of Saints" which was later changed to "The Pilgrims Progress".

- He began with poor Christian, burdened by his sins, looking for the gate and falling into the Slough of Despond. The story began to grow, picture after picture, conversation after conversation, with all sorts of characters crossing Christian's path during his journey. He brought pilgrim in at the gate, through the Interpreter's house, up the Hill Difficulty and into the Palace Beautiful, then slipping into the Valley of Humiliation and the Shadow of Death. How well Bunyan knew from his own experience all of these people and places of whom he wrote. Bunyan had written as far as the Delectable Mountains and then there was a brief interruption. He was set free. Some very influential friends of his worked on his behalf to have him released from prison. So Bunyan went back to his congregation to care for them however the Pilgrim's Progress had so taken hold of him in prison that he could not leave it alone.

- The work was finally completed. he read it first to his wife and family and then had some in his congregation read it who gave him varying opinions. Bunyan finally decided to have it published and it was an immediate success. In the first year three editions were printed and all of them sold out. It was purchased and read by all manner of people. Next to the Bible, The Pilgrim's Progress has sold more copies than any other book that has been printed.

5) Bunyan's Death

- In the middle of August of 1688, a young man approached John asking him if he could go to a town called Reading to help resolve a dispute between he and his father. The young man admitted to John that the dispute was largely due to his own fault and was sorry that his relationship with his father had broken down and that the father had refused to see him anymore. As John was soon to travel to London. he agreed to go to Reading to attempt to resolve the situation.

- Bunyan traveled to Reading and was successful in reconciling the father with the son. He then left for London to take a manuscript of his latest book to the printers and he had several preaching engagements to fulfill. The weather was bad during his ride to London being very cold and driving rain drenched him. He finally arrived at John Stradwick's home, a friend of his with whom he was to stay. That night he developed a cough, nausea, dizziness and a fever. The next morning John insisted of fulfilling the engagements that he had for that day. As the day progressed the symptoms grew worse. However those who heard him preach that day said that they had never heard him preach more lovingly. John returned to the Stradwick's home and was confined to bed until his death ten days later on August 31, 1688.

- Bunyan's final words to those gathered around his bed were, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves. I go to the Father of our Lord Jesus, who will no doubt, through the mediation of his blessed Son, receive me, though a sinner, where I hope ere long we shall meet to sing the new song, and remain everlastingly happy, world without end. Amen." His countenance then changed and he said, "Take me for I am come unto thee" and the Lord took him

-Bunyan was buried in Bunhill Fields which was then in the suburbs of London.