

JOHN BUNYAN

(The following summary of Bunyan's life is culled from "Memoir of John Bunyan," by George Of-
for, who edited Bunyan's 3-volume *Works* [Baker], in volume 1.)

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF BUNYAN'S LIFE:

John Bunyan lived from 1628-1688 in or near Bedford, England (north of London). He is most famous for his allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, which Spurgeon read over every year. He authored 59 books, including his story of his own conversion, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. He spent 12 years in prison because he was not a member of the established Anglican Church, and he refused to stop preaching without the required license.

Bunyan was born into a poor family and was not highly educated. He served for a brief time in Cromwell's army and then worked in his father's trade as a tinker, a repairer of pots and pans. As a young man, an ungodly woman heard him cursing and scolded him that he was the most ungodly fellow she had ever heard and that he would spoil all the youth in town if they came into his company. Her rebuke made a more indelible impression on him than all of the sermons that he had heard up to that point. God used this unlikely woman's rebuke as a seed that eventually led this young, foul-mouthed boy to bitter repentance.

Bunyan lived a very ungodly life, but the Lord was at work in convicting him of his sin. He would have fearful dreams and visions in the night of demons that made him cry out in his sleep. Then one Sunday as he was engaging in sports, which was his usual custom, he was startled with the thought, "Will you leave your sins and go to heaven, or have your sins and go to hell?"

On another occasion, while he was going about his trade, he overheard several godly women talking while they were making lace to sell. They were chatting about the joys of salvation and how their own righteousness was filthy and unable to save them. He took it all in and never forgot it.

These and other such incidents led him to clean up his life and begin to be outwardly moral, but he had no rest for his soul. God had not yet changed his heart. These godly women attended a Baptist church in Bedford, and so Bunyan began attending there. The pastor, John Gifford, took him under wing. After going through terrible agony of soul for several years (you can read about this in *Grace Abounding*), Bunyan finally found peace in Christ. One book that helped him immensely in this struggle was Martin Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*. He said, "I prefer the book before all others as most fit for a wounded conscience." Bunyan was baptized at a time when baptism by immersion was strictly outlawed under severe penalties. Bunyan believed in believer's baptism by immersion, but he

also believed that the local church must accept all whom Christ had accepted, regardless of their views on baptism.

As he grew in Christ, Bunyan served as a deacon, sensed an inward call to the ministry, and began to preach. The church recognized his gifts and publicly set him apart for the ministry of preaching the Word. Bunyan entered into this with a deep sense of his own unworthiness and with fear and trembling (which we all should feel at all times!). Sometimes up to a thousand people would gather secretly at midnight in a secluded spot, sometimes in driving hail or snow, to hear Bunyan expound the Word! Sometimes they met in barns or stables. He preached the truth boldly, which also meant confronting error. This, of course, made him enemies among those who did not want to be exposed or corrected.

Eventually, he was arrested because he did not use the Book of Common Prayer at his services and he was not preaching in the established church. His captors said that they would free him if he promised to stop preaching. It was a severe temptation, because Bunyan had a wife (his second; his first wife had died) and four children, including a blind daughter that he cared for deeply. The thought of not being able to provide for his family and care for this daughter tormented him. But he was faithful to his calling. As he went out of court to be taken to prison, Bunyan said that he went "with God's comfort in my poor soul." When the magistrate warned Bunyan that if he ever got out of prison and preached in that realm again, he would hang for it, Bunyan replied, "If I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel again tomorrow by the help of God."

In the providence of God, although the state church tried to silence him in jail, Bunyan's imprisonment allowed him time to write, and so the world has been blessed with *Pilgrim's Progress* and his many other wonderful writings. He was allowed to have his Bible and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* in his cell. The great 18th century evangelist, George Whitefield, commended Bunyan's works, saying that they "smell of the prison." He continued, "Ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross. The spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them." Bunyan testified that it was in prison that God opened the Word to him in ways that he never experienced elsewhere. He said, "He can make a jail more beautiful than a palace, restraint more sweet by far than liberty, and the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt." In another place ("Prison Meditations," #18), he wrote, "The prison very sweet to me, hath been since I came here, and so would also hanging be, if God would there appear."

After 12 years in jail, Bunyan was released and eventually granted a license to preach. He published more books, including *Pilgrim's Progress*, which made him quite popular. He would sometimes

preach to 1,200 at 7 a.m. in the dark of winter on a work day. About 3,000 flocked to hear him preach in London. Although Bunyan lacked any formal education and did not know Greek or Hebrew, the scholarly John Owen sat at Bunyan's feet. When King Charles II asked Owen why he would go and hear that tinker preach, Owen declared, "May it please your majesty, if I could possess that tinker's abilities for preaching, I would most gladly relinquish all my learning."

Bunyan was a humble man who was always awed by God's grace in saving such a sinner. In *Pilgrim's Progress* he has a short poem, "He that is down need fear no fall; he that is low no pride; he that is humble ever shall, have God to be his guide." During his final illness, he comforted his friends and those around him who were weeping, telling them that to live with Christ forever with peace and joy was far greater. His last words, while struggling with death, were, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves. I go to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will, no doubt, through the mediation of his blessed Son, receive me, though a sinner; where I hope we ere long shall meet, to sing the new song, and remain everlastingly happy, world without end. Amen."

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM JOHN BUNYAN:

1. While a formal education is valuable, the most important thing is to know Christ directly through His Word of truth.

Spurgeon said of Bunyan's grasp of the Word, "Prick that man anywhere and his blood is bible." There is not a paragraph in *Pilgrim's Progress* that is not supported by Scripture. His grasp of biblical truth, gained simply by studying his English Bible with a concordance, is amazing. As you read Bunyan, it is obvious that his knowledge of God's truths was not academic, but devotional and personal. Even if you do not have a large library or access to many books, Bunyan shows that you can be a knowledgeable, accurate, powerful expositor of the Word.

2. There are more riches to be mined out of a single verse of Scripture than most of us ever imagined, and we should present them simply, clearly, and powerfully.

One of my favorite books is Bunyan's "The Acceptable Sacrifice," which is an exposition of Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." (It has recently been re-published by Banner of Truth.) I admit that I would be hard pressed to write one sermon on that verse, much less a book, but Bunyan brings out insight after insight on what it means to have a broken and contrite heart before God. (I gleaned a page of helpful quotes from this book and posted them on our church web site.)

Bunyan has another book, "The Jerusalem Sinner Saved," on the phrase in Luke's Great Commission (Luke 24:47), where Jesus tells the disciples to preach the gospel "beginning in Jerusalem."

Bunyan develops the theme that it was in Jerusalem where the most wicked of sinners crucified the Lord, but it is to them that the gospel first was proclaimed, thus showing God's abundant grace toward sinners.

Another book that has recently been re-published by Banner of Truth is, "Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ," which is an exposition of John 6:37, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." Bunyan skillfully lays out the truths of God's sovereign election and irresistible grace, and yet sets forth the Savior's tender appeal to all to come to Him. When I read Bunyan, I find myself thinking repeatedly, "Yes, there it is in the text! Why didn't I see that?" He sets forth the truth in simple, plain observations from the text of Scripture. Some of his other titles are: "The Work of Jesus Christ as Advocate," from 1 John 2:2; "The Greatness of the Soul," on Jesus' words, "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" "Christ, a Complete Savior," from Hebrews 7:25. "The Strait Gate," on the great difficulty of going to heaven and how many professors will come short. "Light for Them that Sit in Darkness," which is subtitled, "A discourse of Jesus Christ, and that he undertook to accomplish, by himself, the eternal redemption of sinners. Also, How the Lord Jesus addressed himself to this work: with undeniable demonstrations that he performed the same. Objections to the contrary answered." This points out another lesson from Bunyan:

3. Preaching can be heavily doctrinal and yet practical and interesting to the common person.

Bunyan has another treatise, "The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded." Another is "A Treatise on the Fear of God." Another is, "Of Justification by an Imputed Righteousness." Another is, "The Saint's Privilege and Profit," or, "The Throne of Grace," which expounds on Hebrews 4:16. "Saved by Grace" expounds on Ephesians 2:5, "by grace you are saved." All of these are meaty, doctrinal expositions, but they were preached to common, largely uneducated people who flocked by the hundreds and even thousands to hear them. In our day, we're being told that if you want to attract a large crowd, you've got to dumb down the sermon and never preach about anything uncomfortable, like sin or judgment. Bunyan's ministry proves that this is false. He preached the terrors of God's holiness and of judgment to come, but he also offered God's free and abundant grace to the chief of sinners. Let us do likewise! One final lesson:

4. As you are able, write the insights that God has entrusted to you.

This lesson is true of each of the men that we will study. If they had not written, we would hardly know of them. Because they committed their works to paper, we can still read them and grow in the Lord through their insights.

It is very difficult, at least in the U.S., to get anything published. The competition is incredible, and the publishers want things that will sell on a popular level. I once met a Zondervan publishing representative and asked him how I could get my sermons published. He said, "You must be named W. A. Criswell or James Boice. They are the only two men whose sermons we will publish." Criswell and Boice were both very well-known pastors and Christian leaders. Sometime after that, I met Dr. Boice and told him what the Zondervan representative had said to me. I asked him how an unknown nobody like me could get my sermons published. He shook his head knowingly and acknowledged the problem. All he could offer was, "Try to write something at first that they *want*. Then maybe you'll get your foot in the door to write something they *need*."

Well, I've never been able to do that, but I've kept writing my sermons in a readable fashion. The discipline of writing helps me to be concise, focused, and clear. Finally, the Internet provided a way for me to get them out of the drawer and put them in a place where people can access them. While it is not as visible as being published in a book, I do get emails from people all over the world, thanking me for the sermons, and sometimes sharing with me how God has used them in their lives. So if you are able, I'd encourage you to write at least some of your sermons in manuscript form. At the very least, you can use them with your own congregation and they can even be used in your own life. I've sometimes gone back and read a sermon that I had forgotten about, and God used His Word to minister to me, even though I was the one who wrote the sermon in the first place!