

John Bunyan: The Man...

by C. J. L.

Chapter 1: His Boy Hood

Perhaps not so very many young people of today have read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and yet it is a remarkable book that has been translated into more languages and gone through more editions than any other book except the Bible. And it was written by a remarkable man—John Bunyan. He was not rich or well-educated or anything the world calls great, but just a simple, honest, working man, and yet his name is today found in more than one list of "Great Writers."

It is nearly three hundred years since, in the autumn of the year 1628, John Bunyan was born in a humble, straw-thatched cottage in the country village of Elstow in Bedfordshire, England. His parents, though poor, were respectable and hard-working.

The England of three hundred years ago [written in 1930] was in some respects very unlike the England of today. There were no trains, steamships or telephones. Cars and planes were things not even dreamed of. Still, the sun shone as brightly, birds sang as sweetly, and every springtime groups of happy children went out to gather wildflowers.

No one in those days seemed to have even thought of providing free education for the boys and girls, and so children whose parents could not afford to pay the school fees were not only allowed to grow up without knowing how to read and write, but they were often sent out to help earn their living by working in fields or mills at an age when we should say they ought to have been starting to school.

The father and mother of John Bunyan were, as he himself believed, led by the guiding hand of God to send him to the

village school, where he remained long enough to learn how to read and write. But it is not as a great writer but as a simple, humble follower of the Lord Jesus Christ that we care most to remember him.

We do not know much about Bunyan's boyhood, only that he was a real boy, entering with keen zest into all the sports of his village companions. We know enough of the outdoor sports of his day to be sure that they were always rough and sometimes cruel, bull-baiting and cock-fighting being among them. The village green was, on Sunday afternoons, the favourite gathering-place of the village boys, and Bunyan soon became an acknowledged leader in their sports and was as careless and godless as any of them, though he did not fall into the drinking habits that were then so common. He seems to have learned his father's trade of a tinker, in those days considered a far more settled and respectable calling than it is at present. He did not travel about the country with a tiny cart, though he may have visited the neighboring farms and cottages when his services were required to repair kitchen utensils, but he had a settled home in which he carried on his trade.

Wild and reckless as his village companions often thought him, as a boy of not more than nine or ten years old, he often had a deep sense of sin and a great fear of death and judgment. He himself tells us that frightful dreams and fearful visions often made him afraid to go to sleep, and the fear of being lost, eternally lost, often came like a dark cloud over him even while engaged in some boyish sport. But these impressions soon faded away.

Still, the eye of God was upon him, and the hand of God was outstretched to save him. Twice he narrowly escaped drowning, once in the river Ouse, near Bedford, and once farther north in a creek of the sea.

The death of his mother, his sister Margaret, and a very short time afterward his father may have depressed his naturally high spirits and helped to make him long for something more stirring than his quiet life at Elstow. He could hardly have been more than sixteen when he enlisted as a soldier, and for a short time he tried army life during the civil war between Parliament and Charles I.

He was not more than twenty years of age when he married. The short account Bunyan wrote of his own life tells us little if anything about the orphan girl he married, not even the name of her parents, only that her father was a man who feared God and that she brought with her to her new home two or three books that had belonged to him. One of these, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, was in after years greatly valued by Bunyan, though at the time of his marriage he had no taste for such reading. He himself said, "A ballad or a news-book would have pleased me better." Mrs. Bunyan brought no marriage portion to her husband, but she proved herself a true and faithful wife and a loving mother to his children, of whom he had several. His blind daughter Mary, a gentle, thoughtful child, had, even as a baby, a very warm place in his affections.

The young couple began their married life with very little of this world's goods, and they had, as he also tells us, hardly a dish or spoon between them. "We were as poor as poor could be."

Much of the little that Bunyan had learned during his school days had doubtless been forgotten, but he was fond of reading, and his young wife would often, when his day's work was ended, beg him to read to her from one of the books her father had so loved and prized. She would also tell him of her father's godly life, and how he used to reprove swearing, or the use of bad language, whenever or wherever he heard it.

Bunyan thought he would be such a man as his wife's father had been, and so he began to go twice every Sunday to church and became one of the bell-ringers. But his reformation, as far as it went, was only outward; he had not felt his need of the grace of God or even his need of salvation through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2: Early Impression

"Trying to be a godly man," as Bunyan himself expressed it, was poor work. He tells us that on Sunday mornings he went to the parish church, joined in the singing, and made the responses. Sometimes if he had been more than usually impressed by the sermon, he would return to his cottage home feeling very miserable, but he goes on to say that his Sunday dinner soon drove away all serious thoughts, and in the afternoon he would be found on the village green entering with all the energy of his early manhood into the sports he loved so well.

Yet even there he often felt the striving of the Holy Spirit. On one occasion, when engaged in playing a game, he thought he heard a voice from heaven asking him whether he would leave his sins and go to heaven, or keep his sins and go to hell. He also seemed to see the Lord Jesus Christ looking down upon him with a look so full of love and pity that for a moment his heart was melted. Then would come the whisper of the evil one that for him it was too late; he had sinned too often and too long to dare to hope for forgiveness; he should be eternally lost, and since he must go to hell, he might as well go there for many sins as for few.

As he worked steadily at his trade, he had not much free time during the week, but when Sunday came, though his place in church was seldom if ever empty, later in the day he entered with a keen, almost boyish delight into all the sports

and games of the village lads and young men.

Poor Bunyan! He must often have found during those years that "trying to be good" was hard, weary work. He had still to learn God's way of salvation—to learn that

"Till to Jesus' work you cling
By a simple faith,
Doing is a deadly thing;
Doing ends in death."

Very often in those years of wild, reckless daring he would use very bad language and behave more like a madman than a sane person. One day when standing at a neighbour's shop window, swearing, the woman who kept the shop, though she bore anything but a good character in the village, came out and reproved him so sharply, saying that his example was enough to spoil all the youth in the place, that he felt quite ashamed of his conduct and went away silent and downcast.

How could he give up swearing? he asked himself. He resolved to try. The effort must have cost him a great deal, but before many weeks had passed he found that he could speak better, and with more pleasure, without putting an oath before every sentence and another after it. About the same time he began to read the Bible and was soon greatly interested in the historical books. Paul's epistles he admitted he did not get on very well with as he could not understand them.

His outward reformation continued. He thought that perhaps after all he might get to heaven if he could succeed in keeping the ten commandments (a proof that he was still a stranger to the grace of God). Now and then, when he thought he had kept them pretty well, he felt encouraged and almost happy, "but sometimes," he said, "when I had broken one, I would repent, say I was sorry, and begin

again."

But it was not long, however, before in the mercy of God he was aroused from his weary, hopeless efforts at law-keeping. Business having one day taken him to Bedford, he overheard the conversation of some godly women who, to his surprise, seemed to be sure, quite sure, that through faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ they had received the forgiveness of sins. They also spoke of the preciousness of Christ and of the delight they found in reading the Word of God and in prayer.

He wrote: "They spoke with such joy, and with such an appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as persons who had found a new world." He listened for a while and then passed on, but he could not forget what he had heard. He saw and felt that he needed something that he did not have. He could not, dared not, meet a holy God with no better covering than his own fancied self-righteousness, with no firmer standing ground than his own poor efforts at good works.

The Bible, he says, became a new book to him; every spare moment was given to its study. The epistles of Paul grew day by day more sweet and precious to him, though he had not then accepted salvation as the free gift of God. He was still praying to be forgiven, when he might have been rejoicing in the knowledge that God for Christ's sake had pardoned all his sins.

He did wisely in seeking for Christian counsel and fellowship. The godly women whose conversation had made such an impression upon him were almost the first friends to whom he spoke of his desire to enjoy what he felt sure they possessed, peace with God. They did what they could to help and encourage him, and they introduced him to Mr. Gifford, an earnest Christian who was at that time preaching in

Bedford and whose friendship and godly counsel Bunyan enjoyed for many years and always spoke of as a tender mercy from the Lord.

Sleeping or waking, Bunyan felt the reality and importance of eternal things, and his dreams often troubled him, though at other times they encouraged him. Once he dreamed that he saw his Bedford friends enjoying themselves on the sunny side of a high mountain, while he on the other side was shivering in cold darkness and despair.

How he longed to be with them! But a barrier, so high that he could not climb it, seemed to shut him in, a helpless, hopeless prisoner. After what seemed a long time, he thought he saw a gap in the barrier, but it was so small and narrow that it seemed impossible that he could force his way through. He would try, and after many efforts he succeeded and stood with the happy company in the bright, warm sunshine. He awoke comforted, but the gladness was only short-lived and soon gave place to doubts and fears. Perhaps, he thought, he had sinned away the day of grace, and he might as well give up seeking God and get what pleasure he could out of the world. He did not understand that a living, risen Saviour was seeking him and that before long the seeking Saviour and the long-sought sinner would rejoice together.

Chapter 3: The Light Breaks In

We need not linger over the weary years during which Bunyan tried so hard to earn or buy the salvation that was offered to him "without money and without price" as the free gift of God. His outward reformation continued and soon became the talk of his neighbours, who were surprised, as he himself said, "as well they might be," at the change in his words and ways.

Sometimes he was very well satisfied with himself and

thought that he had become "a godly man," but his comfort, such as it was, did not last long. The good opinion of his neighbors could not give him rest of heart or peace of conscience, for such words as, "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7), would seem to stand out as if written in letters of light from the pages of his Bible, and he knew his heart was not right with God.

Looking within for any ground of hope, for any assurance of pardon, is poor, weary work; it is not until the eye of faith rests upon the Lord Jesus and His finished work that the peace and joy of known forgiveness fill the soul, and for John Bunyan that moment was very near. He tells us how, when thinking one day of the sinfulness of his own heart, the scripture came with power to his soul, "[HE HATH] MADE PEACE BY THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS." Again and again the words seemed repeated, each time with fresh power and light, and he saw that what he had been so long and vainly trying to DO had been DONE by Another, and that One was the Son of God.

"From that moment," he said, "I saw that through the blood, God and my soul were friends," and he rejoiced in the gladness of the Father's welcome, the sweetness of the Father's kiss. His tears fell fast, but they were not tears of sorrow but of joy, as he praised God for His abounding mercy.

Very soon after he came upon an old copy of Martin Luther's writing on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians. It must have been read and reread many times, for it was so tattered and worn that he thought it must fall to pieces every time he turned its pages. But as he read, he found to his wonder and delight that another had traveled by the same road of weary, hopeless effort to make himself pleasing to God, and another had found rest and peace just

where he had found it, in the finished work of Christ.

Though he was often sorely tempted to think that he had deceived himself by believing that his many sins could have been forgiven, the written word, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7), was again and again used by the Holy Spirit to restore to him the joy of salvation.

Long before this time he had found a little company of the Lord's people then meeting at Bedford, who became very dear to him. Among his special friends were the three poor but godly women whose conversation about the things of God, as they sat together in a doorway, had so impressed him.

About the year 1655 he left his native village and with his wife and two little daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, went to live in Bedford. Soon after his first wife died, and then he lost a Christian friend to whose counsel and spiritual help he owed so much.

In his second marriage he again found a true helpmeet, one who loved and understood him and, wherever it was possible, helped him in his work. His Bedford friends, knowing him to be an earnest Christian, a ready speaker, and feeling sure that he had the needed gift, asked him to preach to them. The request took him by surprise, but after much waiting upon God in prayer he consented. The Lord blessed the simple gospel service, and requests for his help came in from all the villages for miles around. While his Sundays, and often his weeknight evenings, were thus employed, he still worked at his trade, and with the blessing of the Lord upon his industry and perseverance he was able to support his family with some degree of comfort.

Wherever it became known that he was expected to

preach, crowds gathered to hear him, and though some, perhaps, were only curious to know what the "tinker" would have to say, numbers were aroused to a real concern about eternal things, and many were converted. He often asked himself, Should I not in simple faith give myself wholly to the work of the Lord? He waited often and much upon God in prayer. The good Master he served had said to Andrew and Peter, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19), and in the secret of his soul John Bunyan knew that the call of God had come to him, and he must not, dared not, disobey.

At first he found it hard to believe that God could or would speak by his lips to any. The sense of his own unworthiness would often cast a dark shadow upon his spirit, and yet he seemed to have no choice but to go on telling others what God had done for his soul. He tells us that before and after preaching he always felt greatly humbled and cast down; still he must go on.

Many saw and owned his gifts as a preacher. Perhaps the secret of his power was the simple, wholehearted way in which he believed the truth of what he sought to impress upon others. To him the pardoning grace of God and the love of Christ were very real.

Going one weekday to preach in a village near Cambridge, a great number of people had gathered to hear him. A Cambridge scholar passing at the time asked the meaning of the crowd and was told that John Bunyan, the tinker, was going to preach. Calling a boy who stood near, he gave him two pence to hold his horse, saying in a careless, offhand way, "I never heard a tinker preach, so I think I'll stop and hear what the fellow has to say." The gospel message was blessed to his conversion, and he afterward became an earnest preacher and one greatly used by God.

On another occasion, as he was going to preach, he was met by a professor, a man of great learning, who asked him how he dared to preach, not having the original Scriptures. Bunyan replied by saying, "Have you the original scriptures, sir, those that were written by the apostles and prophets?" "No, I cannot say that I have, but I have what I believe to be a true copy." "And I," said Bunyan, "have the English Bible, which I also believe to be a true copy." The professor passed on.

Chapter 4: Bunyan the Preacher

We shall understand a little more clearly why so many of what we should call Bunyan's best years were spent in prison, when we remember that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written in Bedford jail. We shall see the hand of God in his long imprisonment, giving him time and leisure during the weary years he spent in his prison cell to write a book that has been read and enjoyed by countless thousands.

About the time of which I am writing, great changes had taken place in England. Oliver Cromwell had died, and the people soon grew tired of the time of misrule and lawlessness that followed his death. Thinking it would be much better to have a crowned king again, Charles Stuart, who was at that time in exile, was invited to occupy the throne of his father, Charles I. In this way the period of English history called the Restoration began.

Within six months of his landing on British ground Charles II issued an order that all preachers *must* use what was called *The Book of Common Prayer*, and that all preaching *must* be on lines ordered by the king. Any who refused to obey were liable to be sent to prison.

There were many godly men who felt that even when commanded by the king they must not, dared not, disobey

God. These soon became known as Nonconformists. Among them John Bunyan was perhaps one of the best known in Bedford and the neighborhood. For five or six years he had been preaching the gospel; God had blessed his labours, and many people had been led to a saving knowledge of Christ.

He knew that the time of trial might be very near, and doubtless he often prayed that, if called upon to suffer for Christ's sake, he might be found faithful and not be allowed to deny or dishonour his Lord and Master. On November 13, 1660, Bunyan was expected to preach at a small country place near Huntingdon. As soon as it became known that a meeting was to be held, some people, who wished to put a stop to all preaching except in churches, went to the magistrate and told him that the people who attended such meetings usually carried firearms, were disturbers of the peace, and might even lay plots for the overthrow of the newly-crowned king.

Of course such charges were untrue, but the magistrate believed them and issued an order for Bunyan's arrest. A few of his friends heard of the danger and whispered to him that perhaps it might be better not to hold the meeting.

Some advised his escape; even the brother in whose house the meeting was to be held thought that to escape would be the best thing he could do.

"I might have escaped," he himself said, "had I been minded to play the coward."

It must have been a trying moment for the man whom God intended should write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and write it, too, not by his cottage fireside, but in a cold, damp cell in Bedford prison. How should he act? What ought he to do? If he was shut up in prison, who would provide for his wife and four children?

It was still some time to the hour when the meeting was to begin. He would commit his way unto the Lord and ask counsel of the Most High. Leaving the house he went alone into a field close by. It was not long before he saw clearly that as a preacher of the glad tidings he had not said or done anything evil, and that if he had to suffer it would be "according to the will of God," and that if the meeting were not held, many timid believers, or those who had been newly converted, might be discouraged and turned back.

Returning to the house, without any show of fear, he opened the meeting in the usual way with prayer; he read a few verses of Scripture and was beginning to preach when the constable arrived with the warrant for his arrest. Bunyan asked to be allowed to say a few parting words to his sorrowing friends. Permission was granted, and he told them it was far better to suffer for the name and sake of Christ, than it would have been for him, or any of them, to have gone to prison as evildoers. He would have said more, but the constable grew impatient and "would not," Bunyan said, "be quiet till they had taken me away from the house."

A few of Bunyan's friends went with him to the house of the magistrate who had given the order for his arrest, but finding that he was not at home, one of his friends who lived near was allowed to find him shelter for the night on the understanding that he should not fail to appear the following morning.

A few truthfully answered questions were enough to show the magistrate that he had made a mistake in giving the order for Bunyan's arrest. The meeting was not such as he had been led to suppose. Bunyan and his friends were loyal, God-fearing subjects. They did not carry firearms, lay plots or even wish to overthrow the king and his government.

The magistrate, seeing himself in the wrong, lost his temper. The whole of the following day was spent in long and trying interviews, and as Bunyan would not, could not, promise to stop preaching, he was sent to prison until the next time the court would be in session.

In Prison: Chapter 5

That Bunyan's imprisonment was unjust, he must have felt keenly. But before his arrest, in earnest, believing prayer, he had put the whole matter into the hands of God, and he knew that his enemies could not keep him in prison a day, or even an hour, longer than they were allowed to do by his Lord and Master. It would be only seven weeks until the court would be in session. There was, he felt sure, no serious charge that could be brought against him. If he could get a fair hearing, might he not hope to be set at liberty?

But a few of his friends felt they could not take his imprisonment so quietly, so after collecting among themselves what they thought would be a sufficient sum of money to be accepted as bail for his appearance on the day of his trial, they went to a young magistrate at Elstow, thinking that by stating the case fairly they might be able to obtain an order for his release. But the magistrate had not been in office long, and though at first he seemed kind and friendly, he would not accept bail, thinking, perhaps, that by doing so he might give offense to an older magistrate who had sent Bunyan to prison.

It must have been a very real disappointment, but strength and grace to take it patiently were given to the much-tried servant of the Lord. Soon after Bunyan wrote, "Verily, I did meet my God sweetly, comforting me and satisfying me that it was His will and mind that for the present I should be there."

When his trial took place he might have been set at liberty if he could or would have promised to not preach. But feeling sure that God had called him to preach the gospel, he could make no such promise, saying as he did, "If they would let me out of prison today, I should, God helping me, be preaching the gospel again tomorrow."

The judges, angry at his refusal, again sent him to prison, warning him that if, within a given time, he did not give the required promise, he might be banished from the kingdom or even sentenced to death.

His faithful wife Elizabeth, rising from the sick bed on which she had lain ever since the shock of her husband's arrest had brought on a severe illness, made her way to London, a very serious journey in those days. She even presented her husband's petition before the House of Lords, believing that if those in high places only knew the facts of the case he would be set at liberty.

Sir Matthew Hale spoke to her kindly and even showed the petition to one or two others of the peers who sat near him, but in the end he returned it to her, saying that they could do nothing and that her husband must await the next meeting of the court. Sad, weary and almost brokenhearted, the poor wife turned her steps homeward.

During the first two years of Bunyan's imprisonment he was allowed more freedom than most prisoners usually are. A warm friendship seems to have grown up between the head jailer and the prisoner, whom he not only respected, but even loved. Through his kindness Bunyan was sometimes allowed to visit his family and, now and then, even to spend the night at home.

On one such occasion, to the great surprise of his wife, he got up and dressed himself soon after midnight, saying that

he must return to prison. His friend, the head jailer, was not pleased at being disturbed at such an early hour, but quite unknown to either himself or Bunyan, it had been whispered abroad that too great liberty was allowed to prisoners in Bedford jail, and a special messenger was sent to observe and report. This messenger arrived very early in the morning and asked, "Are all the prisoners safe?"

"Yes, all safe."

"Is John Bunyan in his cell?" "Yes."

Grateful for his own narrow escape from trouble, the jailer said to Bunyan that he knew when to come back much better than he could have told him.

Chapter 6: A Free Man at Last

But how did Mrs. Bunyan and her family live while the husband and father was in prison and so unable to provide for them?

Their Christian friends, and also some of their neighbours, were kind and did all in their power to help them. But they were themselves poor and could not support the family. It must often have grieved Bunyan deeply to see how pale and thin his children were looking, and to notice that their clothes, though always clean and neatly mended, could not keep them warm.

What could he do to earn even a few pence? He did not know any trade but his own, and in prison he could not work at that. Yet he felt that he *must* and ought to do something to help to provide food for his family. He could prepare shoe laces. A very small outlay would buy tape and braid enough to enable him to make a beginning. But how should he dispose of them? For that he must count upon the help of his much-loved blind daughter Mary. With her youngest brother

Joseph, a child of six years old, as a guide, she could go from house to house offering them for sale. It seemed hard to send a timid, delicate girl like Mary on such an errand, but her father knew that she would do her best to find customers.

It was not long before the children were well-known in the streets and lanes of Bedford and its neighborhood, as day by day with varying success they tried to sell the laces their father had gotten ready for them. Sometimes Mary's gentle manner and pleading voice would arouse a feeling of compassion, and they would find a buyer; at others they would meet with a rough refusal, and then with her sightless eyes filled with tears Mary would try to draw her little brother past. Joseph, who was not easily discouraged, would sometimes add to his sister's timid plea such words as, "Please do buy Mary's laces; if you don't we shall starve, for we have no money to buy bread with."

Though during the first years of Bunyan's imprisonment he had been allowed a good deal of liberty, owing to the kindness of the head jailer, it was not to be continued. Many of his friends had urged him, if possible, to obtain leave of absence for two or three days, believing that if he could go to London and himself present a petition to the king, he might be set at liberty. Leave was granted, and there is every reason to believe that the journey was taken with no other object. But false reports were spread by his enemies, some even saying that his intention was to stir up a rebellion against the king. Though he was himself a loyal and peaceable subject, he did not get an opportunity of presenting his petition, and the only result of his journey appeared to be that his friend, the head jailer, received official notice during his absence that the prisoners committed to his charge were not to be allowed under any pretext to leave the prison.

Trying as this order must have seemed to Bunyan, he soon found that he had more leisure for writing. It was during the later years of his imprisonment that his great work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was written. He also wrote *Grace Abounding*, in which, in simple, though well-chosen words, he told the story of his own conversion. His *Holy War* was also written while he was in prison, and one or two other, less-known works.

After he had spent six years in Bedford jail he was granted a short interval of liberty, but he was again arrested on the old charge that he would not give up preaching the gospel. In the year of the great fire of London he was again sent to prison, where he remained another six years.

Early in 1672 his imprisonment came to an end. The long-closed gates were opened, and he went forth a free man, rejoicing in what he held dearer than personal liberty—freedom to preach the gospel.

But little is known of the closing years of Bunyan's life. He had always tried to be a peacemaker, and his last effort to persuade a father to forgive a son who had, he thought, greatly offended him brought on the illness that a few days later caused his death. The father pardoned the son, and, rejoicing in the success of his mission, he mounted his horse and began a ride of forty miles from Reading to London. The rain fell in torrents, and when he reached his journey's end he was soaked, chilled and exhausted. He only lived for two weeks after, and on August 31, 1688, in the sixtieth year of his age, the Lord put him peacefully to sleep.

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