



## PROFILE IN FAITH

## Grace Abounding: The Life of John Bunyan

by David B. Calhoun

*Professor Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri*This article originally appeared in the Summer 2010 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

The sixty years of John Bunyan's life were among the most turbulent and troubled years of English history. Born in November 1628, Bunyan lived through the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I, the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell, and the Restoration of 1660. He died in 1688, just before the abdication of James II, the arrival of the reign of William and Mary, and the Toleration Act of 1689.

John Bunyan was born in the small village of Elstow, just south of Bedford on the London road, in south-central England.<sup>1</sup> His father was a poor tinker, making and mending pots and pans. John learned his father's trade, helping him in the workshop and going with him as he pushed a small wooden cart around the countryside to peddle wares and services. John went to school for a short time, long enough, at least, to learn to read and write. The Civil War erupted in England during the summer of 1642. About the time of his sixteenth birthday, John Bunyan enlisted in the Parliamentary Army.

In the summer of 1647, Bunyan returned to Elstow, where he was the ringleader of a group of idle young men much given to swearing and breaking the Sabbath. He was not very concerned with religious matters. He later wrote that he had experienced both 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."

Sometime in 1649 the twenty-one-year-old Bunyan married. We know almost nothing about his wife, not even her name, but we do know that Bunyan saw his marriage as an important turning point in his life. His wife's father was a devout Puritan, and so was she. Bunyan's first child, their blind daughter, Mary, was baptized on July 20, 1650.

Bunyan began going to church, but he "went on in sin with great greediness of mind," he says. One day, as John worked in Bedford, he came upon "three or four poor but pious happy women" sitting at a cottage door in the sunshine, making lace while "commun-ing about the things of God." He came closer to hear what they were saying, for he was, as he puts it, also a "brisk talker in the matters of religion." He soon realized, however, that they were far above him in spiritual matters, "for their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts." "They spoke," Bunyan writes, "as if joy did make them speak."

This meeting with the women marked a definite change in Bunyan's inner life. His thoughts became "fixed on eternity." He began to look into the Bible "with new eyes" and read it as he never had before. Indeed, as he puts it, "I was then never out of the Bible, either by reading or meditation; still crying out to God that I might know the truth, and the way to heaven and glory."

John Bunyan, however, had no assurance that he was "one of that number that did sit in the sunshine." He was so troubled that he hardly knew what to do, when the voice of Christ broke in upon his soul, saying, "And yet there is room." These were "sweet words to me," Bunyan writes; "for, truly, I thought that by them I saw there was place enough in heaven for me; and, moreover, that when the Lord Jesus did speak these words, he then did think of me." Bunyan was encouraged for a time but still faced the old temptations "to go back again." For about a year he remained in great despair until some relief came from various verses of Scripture, and then from Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. The book was "so old that it was ready to fall piece from piece if I did but turn

it over," Bunyan writes. After reading a little of this old book, Bunyan, as he puts it, "found my condition, in [Luther's] experience, so largely and profoundly handled as if his book had been written out of my [own] heart."

One morning the words "My grace is sufficient" came to Bunyan. Earlier he had felt that this verse was "not large enough for me," but now "it was as if it had arms of grace so wide that it could not only enclose me, but many more besides." Still there were doubts, until one day, sitting by the fire, he suddenly felt a desire sound in his heart, "I must go to Jesus." "At this my former darkness and atheism fled away, and the blessed things of heaven were set within my view," he wrote. With joy he told his wife, "O now I know, I know!"

The Bunyans moved from Elstow to Bedford to further his trade and to be closer to his church. He began to preach not only in Bedford but also "in the darkest places in the country." In 1658 Bunyan's wife died, leaving him with four children under ten years old, one of them blind. In 1659 he married Elizabeth (her surname is unknown). He was thirty-one and she was eighteen.

During the Commonwealth there had been a large measure of religious freedom for most separatists, like Bunyan, but this liberty ended in 1660 with the Restoration. Parliament now sought to reestablish a single state-controlled church, and preaching tinkers with undesirable views were silenced. On November 12, 1660, Bunyan planned to preach to a group of people in Bedfordshire. He opened the meeting with prayer, and then, as he began to speak, the constable arrived and arrested him. He was charged with holding an unlawful meeting. The local magistrate offered him a way out: if he would go home and not preach anymore, he would not be prosecuted. This he would not promise, so he was hauled away and locked up in the Bedford County Jail, where he spent most of the years between 1660 and 1672.

While in jail, the Bedford tinker who had become a Puritan preacher worked to support his family by making shoelaces. Bunyan's wife and children were allowed to visit him in prison. Mary, his blind daughter, regularly brought him soup for his supper in a little jar.

Bunyan's Bible was his treasure. He tells us that he never in all his life had "so great an inlet into the Word of God" as he did in prison; he writes that "those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before are made in this place and state to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen him and felt him indeed."

He did not give up his ministry. He simply moved it to the jail. Bunyan and his friends preached to one another on Sundays. People came to see him for counsel. He hoped that his imprisonment might be "an awakening to the saints in the country."

And Bunyan wrote. Late in 1667 Bunyan began expanding a sermon he had preached earlier into a book called *The Heavenly Foot-Man: or, A Description of the Man That Gets to Heaven*. While he was writing this book he was inspired to write another. He explained in the preface of the latter work:

*And thus it was: I writing of the way  
And race of saints in this our gospel day,  
Fell suddenly into an allegory  
About their journey, and the way to glory.*

The allegory's title, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, sets forth the book's theme—the journey that Christian and other pilgrims make from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Upon seeing the Cross, Christian's burden fell away, never to return. There are frequent times of suspense and uncertainty in Christian's pilgrimage (as there are in every Christian's life) but also certainty that the journey will end successfully. (Bunyan was a Calvinist who believed in the perseverance of the saints.) Later Bunyan wrote a second part to *Pilgrim's Progress*. It tells the story of Christian's wife, appropriately named Christiana, who decides to take her children and a neighbor called Mercy and follow her husband.

After 1668 Bunyan's imprisonment seems to have become more and more nominal. He was able to take on an increasing load of church work, culminating in his election as pastor of the Bedford congregation on December 21, 1671. In 1672 King Charles II issued a Declaration of Indulgence for both Protestant Dissenters and Roman Catholics, and in March Bunyan was released from prison. (He was imprisoned again for six months in 1676 and 1677.)

John Bunyan became a recognized leader among the dissenting churches of his part of England. Some, though most often in a jeering manner, called him "Bishop Bunyan." Bunyan ministered to his own congregation in Bedford and to other churches in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Surrey, and London, so far as it was possible in the intermittent persecution of those years.

He became famous as a preacher. His simple themes, homely anecdotes and illustrations drawn from his own life, everyday language, and abundant repetition enabled him to hold congregations spellbound. Some 3,000 people came to hear him one Sunday in London, and 1,200

turned up for a weekday sermon during the winter. King Charles II once asked John Owen, the distinguished Puritan theologian and Oxford scholar, how such an educated man as he could sit and listen to a tinker. Owen replied, "I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's hearts."

Shortly after completing another book, *The Acceptable Sacrifice: or the Excellency of a Broken Heart*, an expanded sermon on Psalm 51:17, Bunyan rode on horseback to Reading to reconcile a son and father who had quarreled. Traveling on to London, Bunyan was drenched in a heavy rain and fell sick with a violent fever. He preached on August 19 at a meetinghouse in Boar's Head Yard. His text was John 1:13—"Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Toward the end of what was to be his last sermon, he said:

*If you are the children of God, live together lovingly; if the world quarrel with you, it is no matter; but it is sad if you quarrel together; if this be amongst you, it is a sign of ill-breeding; it is not according to the rules you have in the Word of God. Dost thou see a soul that has the image of God in him? Love him, love him; say, This man and I must go to heaven one day; serve one another, do good for one another; and if any wrong you, pray to God to right you, and love the brotherhood.*

Bunyan concluded his sermon: "Consider that the holy God is your Father, and let this oblige you to live like the children of God, that you may look your Father in the face, with comfort, another day."

That day was not far off for John Bunyan. He died on August 31, 1688. The cause of his death was influenza,

or possibly pneumonia, which was contracted as a result of his pastoral work of family peacemaking. One of Bunyan's biographers aptly stated: "Thus one last act of love and charity put an end to a life almost entirely devoted to the good of others."<sup>2</sup> On September 2 the sixty-year-old Bunyan was buried in Bunhill Fields in London.

John Bunyan wrote some sixty books—one for every year of his life, it is said. These included many sermons expanded into sizable treatises, poetry, and books for children. His best known books are his spiritual biography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, and two of his allegories, *The Holy War* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, all of which have been steadily in print since Bunyan's day. His greatest book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is still read and loved by people around the world.

### Notes

1. For Bunyan's life and work, see my *Grace Abounding: The Life, Books & Influence of John Bunyan* (Geanies House, Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005).

2. Henri Talon, *John Bunyan: The Man and His Works* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 14.



**David Calhoun** has taught at Covenant College, Columbia Bible College, and Jamaica Bible College (where he was also principal). A minister of the Presbyterian Church in America, he has served with Ministries in Action in the West Indies and in Europe and as dean of the Iona Centres for Theological Study.

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