

John Bunyan

Among the great Puritans who shaped nations appears the name of John Bunyan. He is best known for his writings such as *'Pilgrim's Progress'*, reputed to be the second best selling book of all time.

Following the Great Reformation, the Puritans were the bulwark for ecclesiastical and moral standards within England. In the mid seventeenth Century there were groups of Puritan 'Dissenting' or 'Non-conformist' ministers who preached without being ordained by the Church of England. They refused to subscribe to the *Book of Common Prayer* and any ordinances, festivals or ceremonies that were carried over from Roman Catholicism after the Reformation. They were especially concerned to see Godly ministers preaching God's Word.

In 1572 the Puritans drew up a set of 'admonitions' protesting, among other things, the lack of true ministers in the Church of England. These principles were narrowly defeated and many Puritans, who were the cream of the ministers, began leaving the Church of England to form the English Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist and Quaker denominations. Some remained in the State Church attempting to reform it from within.

The word 'Puritan' became a word of scorn. Yet the Puritans were a passionate group of men who stamped a moral standard and doctrinal purity on England not seen since. The Puritans were also great evangelists and were the inventors of evangelistic literature. They were men of great learning. The Puritan writings and teachings permeated societies around the world. They were sometimes called 'precisians' because of their precision in the Word of God and their doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone). When Puritan Richard Rogers replied to a question asking why he was so 'precise' in his views, he answered: *'I serve a precise God'*.

Political and church opponents conspired to get rid of the Puritan ministers. They resurrected an old *'Act of Uniformity'* which stated all ministers had to give complete allegiance to the *Book of Common Prayer*. The authorities prepared the Act to get rid of the Non-conformist ministers. The deadline was 24th. August, 1662. Over 2,000 ministers were ejected from their churches before preaching their last sermons to capacity crowds. The effect was devastating: *'Religion was almost extinguished and in many of her parishes the lamp of God went out'*. (1) *'We had to travel through a century of coldness and dreariness, and barrenness, of Arminianism and Pelagianism, of Arianism and latent Socinianism'*. (2) Bishop JC Ryle wrote of this as an *'injury to the cause of true religion in England which will probably never be repaired...'* (3)

The Puritans began to preach in homes, barns and fields. In response, Parliament then passed a new Act in 1664, *'The Coventicle Act'* resurrected from an old Act dating back to 1593. The Act forbade gatherings of any more than five people apart from family. The Puritans then preached deeper in the forests. In response, parliament passed *'The Five Mile Act'* which forbade meetings within five miles of any town or village. The Act also prevented Non-conformist ministers from living within five miles of a town and forbade them from teaching in schools. Punishments were fines, confiscation of goods, imprisonment or even death.

It was into this history that John Bunyan was born in 1628 in Elstow to a poor family. Bunyan wrote that by age ten: *'I had but few equals for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God...'* (4) At an early age he was troubled by

Puritan preaching, had terrible dreams and was afflicted with depression. Yet he admitted *'I could not let go of my sins'*. (5)

When he was age 16 his mother and sister died in the flu epidemic of 1644. He became angry and bitter when his father hastily re-married and so Bunyan fell deeper into sin. *'I was the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness'*. (6)

Soon after, he experienced some 'near death incidents'. Once he fell into a creek and almost drowned and another time he fell out of a boat into a river. In 1644 at the age of 16 he signed up as a soldier in the Parliamentary Army to fight in the Great Civil War against the Royalists. He was one night assigned to sentry duty during a siege. At the last minute a fellow soldier asked to take his place and was killed that very night. Bunyan recognised these events as from God but *'none of these things awakened my soul to righteousness'*. He grew more rebellious.(7)

In 1649, at age 21, he was discharged from the army and married Mary, the daughter of an Anglican Puritan. They lived in extreme poverty. Mary's father had given his daughter two books: *'The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven'* and *'The Practise of Piety'*. Bunyan occasionally read these books and was stirred to 'reform' himself. He went to church on Sundays yet secretly practised his ungodly ways during the week.

One Sunday morning Bunyan heard a sermon by vicar Christopher Hall about the Sabbath and he experienced a deep sense of guilt. But by the time lunch was over he had forgotten the guilt and went to his usual Sunday afternoon sport. During the game he suddenly had a strong conviction concerning his sins but concluded it was too late for him to go to Heaven. *'My state is surely miserable; miserable if I leave my sins, but miserable if I follow them; I can but be damned, and if I must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins, as to be damned for few'*. (8)

One day he was at a neighbours shop cursing and swearing as usual when the neighbours wife suddenly rebuked him. Bunyan felt ashamed, went home and began to read a Bible but could not understand the Epistles. For one year Bunyan 'reformed' his speech and conduct. He was proud of this achievement and what others were now saying of him. His character of 'Mr. Legality' in *'Pilgrims Progress'* may have been drawn from these experiences.

In the nearby town of Bedford he came across some lower class women talking about the things of God and he listened in secret. They spoke of helpless sinners, of grace and of being 'Born Again'. John realised he was not Born Again and that he was a hypocrite and an *'ignorant sot'*. He returned to listen more to the ladies and he read the Scriptures afresh. (9)

It was about this time he had a vision - of a mountain with one side warm and sunny and the other side cold and damp. Some ladies were sitting on the sunny side and he was on the other side shivering. Between the two was an impassable wall. He could not with all his strength get over the wall. But there was a tiny doorway and with much struggling he managed to squeeze through and enjoy the warm company. He believed the mountain was the church of God. The sunny side was the light of God's mercy and grace to His people. The wall was the scriptures. The door was Jesus Christ. *'The fact that this door was so narrow that I could hardly get in showed me that no one could enter into this life but those who were in real earnest and left the wicked world behind them...'* (10)

Bunyan was in agony for months as to whether grace had passed him by and whether he was among God's elect. *'If I had the whole world, I would have given it ten thousand times over for this, that my soul might be converted.'* (11) Finally he told some friends in Belfast of his plight. He came to understand that he needed a perfect righteousness to present before God and that this righteousness could only be found in Jesus Christ. He cried: *'Lord, do not let this sense of guiltiness go away except it be through the blood of Christ and the application of your mercy through Him to my soul.'* (12)

Soon after, at the age of 25, he met a Non-conformist rector, Mr. Gifford, of St. John's in Bedford. Gifford took an interest in Bunyan and gave him a right understanding of the Gospel, repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ. He was baptised in the river Ouse in the dead of night so as not to attract attention in troubled times.

Bunyan then entered what he called the 'great storm'. A darkness of depression gripped him and he doubted the very existence of God and Christ. In the turmoil he began to again curse and swear and blaspheme God. *'Surely I am possessed of the devil or perhaps am now become insane'*. (13) He occasionally experienced temporary relief from scripture but would fall back into despair. *'I had almost no other thoughts about him [Christ] except blasphemies, and neither my hating these thoughts nor my resisting them helped in the least to keep them away. No matter what I thought or did, they were still there.'* (14) Months went by and he began to ponder on the thought that *'the blood of Christ remits all guilt'*. (15) He gained a short lived peace, but soon sank back into depression. For nearly three years the battles with depression raged.

One day in 1655 he was walking through a field and the thought was impressed upon him: *'Thy righteousness is in heaven'*. In a moment he saw his righteousness was in Christ at the right hand of the throne of heaven. *'I saw also, 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...now did my chains fall off my legs indeed, I was loosed from my afflictions and irons, my temptations also fled away...Now Christ was all; all my wisdom, all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption...I was joined to Him...Now I saw Christ Jesus was looked on of God and should also be looked upon by us, as that common or public person, in whom all the body of His elect are always to be considered and reckoned: that we fulfil the law by him, rose from the dead by Him, got the victory over sin, death, and the devil and Hell by Him; when He died, we died, and so of His resurrection.'* (16) His guilt of sin briefly came back but as he walked back in the house Bunyan remembered Romans 3:24. *'God seemed to be saying to me: 'Sinner, you think that I cannot save your soul because of your sins; behold my Son is here and I look upon Him and not on you, and I shall deal with you according as I am pleased with Him...By this I was made to understand that God can justify a sinner at any time by looking upon Christ and imputing His benefits to Him.'* (17) These events were later to be fictionalised in *'Pilgrims Progress'*.

Within two years he was appointed a deacon in Bedford. People came by the hundreds to hear him and he preached with great earnestness about the need for salvation. He began his sermons with the law, the terrors of sin and the curse of God. As he matured he preached more on the assurance of salvation. He attracted opposition and became the target of slander and gossip. He was accused of being a witch, a Jesuit, of having

whores, a mistress and illegitimate children. He made no reply.

A blind daughter, Mary, and two sons were born, John (in 1655) and Thomas (in 1658). His wife grew ill and before Bunyan was thirty, she died. He married again quickly (1660) being concerned for the welfare of his family.

On Nov. 12, 1660 Bunyan was preaching in a farmhouse 13 miles from Bedford. He began his sermon and was immediately arrested by a constable and hauled off to jail. He was tried at Elstow and charged and sent to jail for preaching unlawfully and refusing to agree with the *Common Book of Prayer*. Bunyan later wrote glowingly of his time with the Lord in jail. He wrote prolifically, saying *'I have seen things here that I am sure I will never in all the world be able to express.'* (18)

During this time in jail his wife Elizabeth gave birth to a stillborn child. Bunyan's heart was breaking with concern for his wife and family who had no means of support. Elizabeth pleaded with the judges to release her husband. Bunyan had not only received an unfair trial but was not allowed to appeal. (It was later discovered that a clerk kept his name from coming up for appeal).

Two years after Bunyan was jailed the *'Act of Uniformity'* was enforced. Six years passed in jail and suddenly he was set free. Against the law, Bunyan gathered his people and spoke excitedly of his blessed time in prison.

Within a few months (1666) he was again put in jail for *a further six years*. Within the first few weeks his daughter died.

In 1671 the Bedford Congregational church acting by faith called Bunyan to pastor their church, even though he was still in jail! Amazingly three days later Bunyan was freed due to an Act of Parliament granting freedom to all such prisoners. Bigger crowds than ever flocked to hear him preach. In 1675 the laws tightened again and Bunyan was fined and threatened with loss of his goods. He went underground and for 18 months ran from the authorities, barely escaping. Meetings were held in remote places or deep in the forest. Eventually he was caught and sent back to jail. His charge was *'refusing to come to church and receive the sacrament'*. (19) It was during this time in jail he had his famous dream and wrote the classic *'Pilgrims Progress'*.

With the help of John Owen, in 1677 the Bishop of Lincoln ordered Bunyan's release. On a trip to London he was caught in a storm and contracted a fever and then Pneumonia. On August 31st, 1688 after 10 days of struggle, he said *'I desire nothing more than to be with Christ, which is better'*. Bunyan stretched out his arms and said: *'take me, for I come to thee!'*. At age 60 the Lord took him home. His wife and children were devastated. Elizabeth died two and a half years later.

It has been said: *'Bunyan, hardly less than any other living man, helped to keep the soul of England alive'*.

Terry Arnold

Source: *'John Bunyan, a Biography'* by John Dunn, *New Creation Teaching Ministry*

(1) *'Sermons of the Great Ejection'*, Banner of Truth, 1962, P.7 (2) Ibid, P.9 (3) Ibid, P.15 (4) *'Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners'* by John Bunyan, P.8 Moody Press, 1959 (5) Ibid, P.8 (6) *'John Bunyan'*, Word Publishing, 1991, P.20 (7) *'Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners'* by John Bunyan, P.10 Moody Press, 1959 (8) *'Grace Abounding'* by John Bunyan, Word Publishing, 1991, P.24 (9) *'Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners'* by John Bunyan, P.22 Moody Press, 1959 (10) Ibid, P.25 (11) Ibid, P.28 (12) Ibid, P.35 (13) *'Grace Abounding'* by John Bunyan, Word Publishing, 1991, P.47 (14) Ibid, P.51 (15) Ibid, P.52 (16) Ibid, P.89-90 (17) Ibid, P.89 (18) *'Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners'*, by John Bunyan, P.109 Moody Press, 1959 (19) *'Pilgrim and Dreamer'* by Ernest Bacon, P.130 Paternoster Press, 1983