



SECTION I

*A Brief Relation of the Exceeding Mercy of God in Christ,
to His Poor Servant, John Bunyan*

Paragraphs 1–264

1. In this my relation of the merciful working of God upon my soul, it will not be amiss, if in the first place, I do in a few words give you a hint of my pedigree, and manner of bringing up; that thereby the goodness and bounty of God towards me, may be the more advanced and magnified before the sons of men.

2. For my descent then, it was, as is well known by many, of a low and inconsiderable generation; my father's house being of that rank that is meanest, and most despised of all the families in the land. Wherefore, I have not here, as others, to boast of noble blood, or of any high-born state, according to the flesh; though, all things considered, I magnify the heavenly Majesty, for that

by this door He brought me into the world, to partake of the grace and life that is in Christ by the gospel.

3. But yet, notwithstanding the meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents, it pleased God to put it into their hearts, to put me to school, to learn both to read and write; the which I also attained, according to the rate of other poor men's children: though, to my shame, I confess, I did soon lose that I had learned, even almost utterly, and that long before the Lord did work His gracious work of conversion upon my soul.

4. As for my own natural life, for the time that I was without God in the world, it was, indeed, "according to the course of this world and the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). It was my delight to be "taken captive by the devil *at his will*" (2 Tim. 2:26); being filled with all unrighteousness; the which did also so strongly work, and put forth itself, both in my heart and life, and that from a child, that I had but few equals (especially considering my years, which were tender, being but few) both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God.

5. Yea, so settled and rooted was I in these things, that they became as a second nature to me; the which, as I have also with soberness considered since, did so offend the Lord, that even in my childhood he did scare and affrighten me with fearful dreams, and did terrify me with fearful visions. For often, after I have spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my bed been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits, who still, as I then thought, labored to draw me away with them, of which I could never be rid.

6. Also I should, at these years, be greatly afflicted and troubled with the thoughts of the fearful torments of hellfire; still fearing, that it would be my lot to be found at last among those devils and hellish fiends, who are there bound down with the chains and bonds of darkness, unto the judgment of the great day.

7. These things, I say, when I was but a child, but nine or ten years old, did so distress my soul, that then in the midst of my many sports and childish

vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down, and afflicted in my mind therewith, yet could I not let go my sins: yea, I was also then so overcome with despair of life and heaven, that I should often wish, either that there had been no hell, or that I had been a devil; supposing they were only tormentors; that if it must needs be, that I went thither, I might be rather a tormentor, than be tormented myself.

8. A while after those terrible dreams did leave me, which also I soon forgot; for my pleasures did quickly cut off the remembrance of them, as if they had never been: wherefore with more greediness, according to the strength of nature, I did still let loose the reins of my lust, and delighted in all transgressions against the law of God: so that until I came to the state of marriage, I was the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, in all manner of vice and ungodliness.

9. Yea, such prevalency had the lusts and fruits of the flesh in this poor soul of mine, that had not a miracle of precious grace prevented, I had not only perished by the stroke of eternal justice, but had also laid myself open, even to the stroke of those laws which bring some to disgrace and open shame before the face of the world.

10. In these days the thoughts of religion were very grievous to me; I could neither endure it myself, nor that any other should; so that when I have seen some read in those books that concerned Christian piety, it would be as it were a prison to me. "Then I said unto God, 'Depart from me, for I desire not the knowledge of Thy ways'" (Job 21:14). I was now void of all good consideration, heaven and hell were both out of sight and mind; and as for saving and damning, they were least in my thoughts. "O Lord, Thou knowest my life, and my ways were not hid from Thee!"

11. But this I well remember, that though I could myself sin with the greatest delight and ease, and also take pleasure in the vileness of my companions; yet, even then, if I had at any time seen wicked things, by those who professed goodness, it would make my spirit tremble. As once above all the rest, when I was in the height of vanity, yet hearing one to swear that was

reckoned for a religious man, it had so great a stroke upon my spirit, that it made my heart ache.

12. But God did not utterly leave me, but followed me still, not now with convictions, but judgments; yet such as were mixed with mercy. For once I fell into a creek of the sea, and hardly escaped drowning. Another time I fell out of a boat into Bedford river, but, mercy yet preserved me alive: besides, another time, being in a field, with one of my companions, it chanced that an adder passed over the highway, so I having a stick in my hand, struck her over the back; and having stunned her, I forced open her mouth with my stick, and plucked her sting out with my fingers; by which act had not God been merciful unto me, I might by my desperateness, have brought myself to my end.

13. This also I have taken notice of, with thanksgiving: when I was a soldier, I with others, were drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it; but when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room: to which, when I had consented, he took my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shot in the head with a musket-bullet and died.

14. Here, as I said, were 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, and careless of my own salvation.

15. Presently after this, I changed my condition into a married state, and my mercy was, to light upon a wife whose father was 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 a spoon 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 would sometimes read with her, wherein I also found some things that were somewhat pleasing to me (but all this while I met with no conviction). She also would be often telling of me what a godly man her father was, and how he would reprove and correct vice, both in his house, and among his neighbors; what a strict and holy life he lived in his days, both in word and deed.

16. Wherefore these books, with this relation, though they did not reach my heart, to awaken it about my sad and sinful state, yet they did beget within me some desires to religion: so that because I knew no better, I fell in very eagerly with the religion of the times; to wit, to go to church twice a day, and that too with the foremost; and there should very devoutly, both say and sing, as others did, yet retaining my wicked life; but withal, I was so overrun with the spirit of superstition, that I adored, and that with great devotion, even all things (both the high place,¹ priest, clerk, vestment, service, and what else) belonging to the church; counting all things holy that were therein contained, and especially, the priest and clerk most happy, and without doubt, greatly blessed, because they were the servants, as I then thought, of God, and were principal in the holy temple, to do His work therein.

17. This conceit grew so strong in a little time upon my spirit, that had I but seen a priest (though never so sordid and debauched in his life), I should find my spirit fall under him, reverence him, and knit unto him; yea, I thought, for the love I did bear unto them (supposing them the ministers of God), I could have laid down at their feet, and have been trampled upon by them; their name, their garb, and work did so intoxicate and bewitch me.

18. After I had been thus for some considerable time, another thought came in my mind; and that was, whether we were of the Israelites or no? For finding in the scripture that they were once the peculiar people of God, thought I, if I were one of this race, my soul must needs be happy. Now again, I found within me a great longing to be resolved about this question, but could not tell how I should: at last I asked my father of it; who told me, no, we were not. Wherefore then I fell in my spirit, as to the hopes of that, and so remained.

19. But all this while, I was not sensible of the danger and evil of sin; I was kept from considering that sin would damn me, what religion soever I followed, unless I was found in Christ: nay, I never thought of Him, or whether there was such a One, or no. "Thus man, while blind, doth wander, but wearie himself with vanity, for he knoweth not the way to the city of God" (Eccl. 10:15).

¹ High place: altar.

20. But one day (amongst all the sermons our parson made) his subject was, to treat of the Sabbath day, and of the evil of breaking that, either with labor, sports or otherwise. (Now, I was, notwithstanding my religion, one that took much delight in all manner of vice, and especially that was the day that I did solace myself therewith): wherefore I fell in my conscience under his sermon, thinking and believing that he made that sermon on purpose to show me my evil doing. And at that time I felt what guilt was, though never before, that I can remember; but then I was, for the present, greatly laden therewith, and so went home when the sermon was ended, with a great burthen² upon my spirit.

21. This, for that instant did benumb the sinews of my best delights, and did embitter my former pleasures to me; but hold, it lasted not, for before I had well dined, the trouble began to go off my mind, and my heart returned to its old course: but oh! how glad was I, that this trouble was gone from me, and that the fire was put out, that I might sin again without control! Wherefore, when I had satisfied nature with my food, I shook the sermon out of my mind, and to my old custom of sports and gaming, I returned with great delight.

22. But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game of cat,³ and having struck it one blow from the hole, just as I was about to strike it the second time, a voice did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul, which said, "Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?" At this I was put to an exceeding [a]maze; wherefore leaving my cat upon the ground, I looked up to heaven, and was, as if I had, with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if He did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these and other ungodly practices.

23. I had no sooner thus conceived in my mind, but, suddenly, this conclusion was fastened on my spirit (for the former hint did set my sins again before my face), that I had been a great and grievous sinner, and that it was

² Burthen: burden or weight.

³ Or tipcat, an outdoor game in which a small stick (cat), pointed at each end, tipped up into the air and batted the farthest distance.

now too late for me to look after heaven; for Christ would not forgive me, nor pardon my transgressions. Then I fell to musing on this also; and while I was thinking of it, and fearing lest it should be so; I felt my heart sink in despair, concluding it was too late; and therefore I resolved in my mind I would go on in sin. "For," thought I, "if the case be thus, my state is surely miserable; miserable if I leave my sins, and 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 be damned for few."

24. Thus I stood in the midst of my play, before all that then were present: but yet I told them nothing; but I say; having made this conclusion, I returned desperately to my sport again; and I well remember, that presently this kind of despair did so possess my soul, that I was persuaded I could never attain to other comfort than what I should get in sin; for heaven was gone already, so that on that I must not think; wherefore I found within me great desire to take my fill of sin, still studying what sin was yet to be committed, that I might taste the sweetness of it; and I made as much haste as I could to fill my belly with its delicates, lest I should die before I had my desire; for that I feared greatly. In these things, I protest before God, I lie not, neither do I feign this form of speech; these were really, strongly, and with all my heart, my desires: "The good Lord, Whose mercy is unsearchable, forgive me my transgressions!"

25. And I am very confident, that this temptation of the devil is more usual among poor creatures, than many are aware of, even to overrun the spirits with a scurvy and seared frame of heart, and benumbing of conscience, which frame he still and slyly supplieth with such despair, that, though not much guilt attendeth souls, yet they continually have a secret conclusion within them, that there is no hope for them; "for they have loved sins, therefore after them they will go" (Jer. 2:25; 18:12).

26. Now therefore I went on in sin with great greediness of mind, still grudging that I could not be so satisfied with it, as I would. This did continue with me about a month, or more; but one day, as I was standing at a neighbor's shop window, and there cursing and swearing, and playing the madman, after my wonted manner, there sat within the woman of the house, and

heard me; who, though she also was a very loose and ungodly wretch, yet protested that I swore and cursed at that most fearful rate, that she was made to tremble to hear me; and told me further, that I was the ungodliest fellow for swearing, that she ever heard in all her life; and that I, by thus doing, was able to spoil all the youth in the whole town, if they come but in my company.

27. At this reproof I was silenced, and put to secret shame; and that too, as I thought, before the God of heaven; wherefore, while I stood there, and hanging down my head, I wished with all my heart that I might be a little child again, that my father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing. "For," thought I, "I am so accustomed to it, that it is in vain for me to think of a reformation"; for I thought it could never be.

28. But how it came to pass, I know not; I did from this time forward, so leave my swearing, that it was a great wonder to myself to observe it; and whereas before I knew not how to speak unless I put an oath before, and another behind, to make my words have authority; now I could, without it, speak better, and with more pleasantness than ever I could before. All this while I knew not Jesus Christ, neither did I leave my sports and plays.

29. But quickly after this, I fell into company with one poor man that made profession of religion; who, as I then thought, did talk pleasantly of the scriptures, and of the matters of religion; wherefore falling into some love and liking to what he said, I betook me to my Bible, and began to take great pleasure in reading, but especially with the historical part thereof; for as for Paul's epistles, and such like scriptures, I could not away with them, being as yet ignorant, either of the corruptions of my nature, or of the want and worth of Jesus Christ to save me.

30. Wherefore I fell to some outward reformation both in my words and life, and did set the commandments before me for my way to heaven; which commandments I also did strive to keep, and, as I thought, did keep them pretty well sometimes, and then I should have comfort; yet now and then should break one, and so afflict my conscience; but then I should repent, and say I was sorry for it, and promise God to do better next time, and there get help again; for then I thought I pleased God as well as any man in England.