



PREFACE

HENDRICKSON CHRISTIAN CLASSICS EDITION

John Bunyan
(1628–1688)

I have sometimes seen more in a line of the Bible, than I could well tell how to stand under; and yet at another time, the whole Bible hath been to me as dry as a stick; or rather, my heart hath been so dead and dry unto it, that I could not conceive the least dram of refreshment, though I have looked it all over . . . Oh! it is a goodly thing to be on our knees, with Christ in our arms, before God: I hope I know something of these things.

—*Grace Abounding*, Conclusion, paragraphs C4, C5

John Bunyan is best known for his allegory of a Christian's life journey—*Pilgrim's Progress*, traditionally the most cherished book in Protestant households (excepting the Bible, of course). After translating the scriptures,

John Bunyan

British missionaries would turn to *Pilgrim's Progress* as their second teaching document.

But many consider Bunyan's autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, his finest work. Addressed to his "children," it winds personal story around didactic theological points with a lively and compelling use of metaphor and simile.

Grace Abounding was written in the first half of Bunyan's twelve-year prison term—an initially short sentence, for preaching at an illegal church gathering, that was interminably extended because he would not promise to cease and desist. The core of the book was published in 1666, six years before his release from the local jail.

To fully appreciate John Bunyan, it is necessary to view him within the context of history. John was born in Elstow near Bedford, England, in 1628, where his family had owned land for three hundred years. The King James Bible had been published a mere seventeen years earlier, in 1611.

Vocationally, John followed in the footsteps of his father, who was a tinker, and not known for his piety. He received a rudimentary education at a local grammar school, and probably became an apprentice repairman at an early age. His mother and his much-loved sister died of an epidemic when he was fifteen, and his father immediately remarried.

Charles I became king in 1625, but opposition groups in Parliament limited his powers. Resisting efforts (by the "Puritans") to purify the government and the Church of England, Charles raised the stakes by ruling without Parliament for over a decade (1629–1640). By the time Charles did summon Parliament, it chose, instead, to raise its own army to fight him. The Parliamentary forces found sympathizers in the Nonconformists, who believed the king and the Church of England were still much too sympathetic to Roman Catholics.

The English Civil War (1642–1648) pitted the king's forces against the Parliamentary army. In the political realm, the battle lined up between the king and Parliament: the divine right of the monarchy to rule absolutely, set against the authority of Parliament and the civil and religious rights of individuals. In the religious realm, it was the Established Church of England

versus the Nonconformists—Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and anyone else who didn't "conform" to the Established Church. (To keep things lively, the Roman Catholics were feared and distrusted by everyone.) Socially, the "new money" of the rising middle class—the merchants, manufacturers, and financiers—was fighting against the old money and power of the titled landed gentry for position and voice. All of English life was in upheaval, a bloody tangle of politics and religion.

Based upon his own words, Bunyan's allegiances were probably driven by class and political considerations, rather than any religious convictions. In 1644, at age sixteen, John enlisted and served nearly three years in the Parliamentary army, which fought against Charles. Charles ultimately lost the war—and his head—in 1649, and Oliver Cromwell became the leader of the Protectorate, essentially a military dictatorship. For us, these names and events are mere footnotes of history; but they defined the life and career of Bunyan. This humble tinker was swept into the political, religious, and civil uproar that would change England for centuries.

With Cromwell in power, everything turned around in favor of the "Protestants," and against the Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Cromwell codified godly living into law. Theaters were closed, Sabbath rest enforced, and modest dress and manners were legislated.

Once out of the army, Bunyan returned home, and soon married his first wife, with whom he had four children. Little is known of this woman, except that her dowry included two books: Arthur Dent's *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety*. It was otherwise a poor beginning—they did not have "so much household stuff as a dish or a spoon betwixt us both." But she also brought to her marriage a practical faith, and stories of her father's godliness. Under her influence he started attending church.

I fell in very eagerly with the religion of the times; to wit, to go to church twice a day . . . and there should very devoutly, both say and sing, as others did, yet retaining my wicked life . . .

—his wickedness consisting of a coarse vocabulary and a disregard for Sabbath restrictions against recreational sports.

John Bunyan

It's hard for us to imagine the depths of condemnation he felt for willfully continuing a Sunday afternoon game of "cat"—a distant cousin of baseball—after he felt convicted of its sinfulness. "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?'"

His rebellious response? "I resolved in my mind I would go on in sin . . . I had as good be damned for many sins, as be damned for few."

A few such moments in his youth took their toll and served to convince Bunyan that he'd committed the unpardonable sin—that he was beyond God's mercy. And his blow-by-blow account of this sometimes despairing, sometimes argumentative, dialogue with God fills more than half of this book's text.

My torment would flame out and afflict me; yea, it would grind me, as it were to powder, to consider the preservation of God towards others, while I fell into the snare.

Grace Abounding is not an autobiography in a contemporary "I-did-what-when" fashion. He never names his first wife, nor mentions her death in 1658 and his remarriage in 1659 to a much younger woman; he never names his children; he personally comments about only one of four, and this on account of the girl, his oldest, being blind.

The chronological progression through his young adult years is always framed in spiritual terms. While working in Bedford one day, he noticed several "poor women sitting at a door, in the sun, talking about the things of God." He stopped to listen, and they drew him into conversation—that day and others.

Before long he was conversing also with John Gifford, a physician-turned-pastor of a Bedford Nonconformist-Baptist church. "Holy Mr. Gifford" was instrumental in Bunyan's path to peace. In 1653 he was baptized and joined the Bedford congregation.

Bunyan may have lacked a formal education, but he was an enthusiastic reader, devouring the works of various theologians and preachers. He had an intimate knowledge of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (*The Book of Martyrs*). His most valued book except for the Bible was an English translation of

Martin Luther's *Commentary of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*. And of course there were the books from his first wife's father.

It is clear from his writings that John Bunyan was well read and well informed, far more learned than he would admit. In an oddly modern spin of image management, he emphasized his lack of academic credentials to help his credibility among common folks, people like himself. He claimed that the Bible was the source of his knowledge and the Holy Spirit provided the insights and guidance necessary to uncover the mysteries of God.

In the years following his conversion, Bunyan embraced his faith enthusiastically, studying the scripture and his favorite teachers, and being ordained as a deacon. He then wrote treatises and pamphlets, sharing his faith and arguing his case for his beliefs. Ultimately, he traveled throughout surrounding villages as a preacher, gaining a reputation for his powerful messages.

But politically, the tide was again turning. Cromwell was never able to give the Parliamentarians what they had fought for: a free Parliament and freedoms of speech and press. And the middle and lower classes did not gain the political rights they had fought for; power remained with the landed and titled. Ultimately, the Protectorate was a failure, outliving Cromwell by only two years. In 1660 Charles II (the son of Charles I) returned from exile in Europe and restored the monarchy, and with it, the Established Anglican Church. Power swung back to Canterbury; new laws forbade religious meetings that did not follow the forms of the Anglican Church, under the penalty of imprisonment or deportation. Thousands of Nonconformist ministers were left without pulpits.

Though Bunyan was still a tinker, he was preaching on the side, and refused to discontinue. In 1660, while preaching to a house group, he was apprehended for maintaining unlawful assemblies or "conventicles." He admits, "Had I been minded to have played the coward, I could have escaped and kept out of [the constable's] hands," but Bunyan continued to speak, convinced that "to preach God's Word is so good a work, that we shall be well rewarded, if we suffer for that." Convicted, he was sentenced to jail for three months, the usual sentence for this offense. But because he would not promise to stop preaching if released, he remained in the Bedford County jail—under the threat of deportation or death—indefinitely.

There's no doubt but that Bunyan's twelve years in jail shaped his faith, his thinking, and his writing. A full 20 percent of his life, the years from age 32 to 44, was spent in prison.

Being jailed for one's religious convictions brings with it a particular sort of suffering. Even though he helped support his family by making "many hundred gross of long tagg'd [shoe] laces," he feared for the welfare and the safety of his family. He writes:

I found myself a man and compassed with infirmities; the parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place, as the pulling the flesh from the bones, and that not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries, and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all besides. Oh! The thoughts of the hardship I thought my poor blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces . . . Oh! I saw in this condition [that] I was as a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children; yet, thought I, "I must do it, I must do it."

The vehemence of his conviction—that faith and ministry took precedence over family concerns—is not part of the current American landscape.

Despite the intentions of authorities to suppress Bunyan, the jail afforded him new opportunities to share his faith. While incarcerated, Bunyan wrote nine books, among them *Profitable Meditations*, *Christian Behavior*, *The Holy City*, and the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Bunyan remained jailed until 1672, when Charles II issued his Declaration of Indulgence, suspending all the laws against both Nonconformists and Roman Catholics. But Parliament revoked the declaration the following year, and John was imprisoned briefly again about five years later, this time for not attending an established parish church.

Upon his release from prison in 1672, John obtained the appropriate license and resumed his preaching, pastoring the Bedford congregation that had helped support his family in his absence. He also preached throughout the surrounding villages, traveling as far as London and Reading, where people flocked to hear him. His sermons carried an increased sense of authority

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners

as a result of his imprisonment and his books. He encouraged rousing congregational singing. His zeal and dedication for the Lord ultimately caused friend *and* foe to call him “Bishop Bunyan.” In short, Bunyan was a celebrity.

In these years, he maintained a heavy pastoral schedule that included writing. All told, Bunyan wrote more than sixty books. After the publication of *Pilgrim’s Progress* (part 1 in 1678), he released two more complex allegories, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* and *Holy War*, and, in 1684, part 2 of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The two parts of the much-loved *Pilgrim’s Progress* are quite distinct in style and in tone, and they mirror Bunyan’s personal journey. Part 1, the story of a man named Christian, reflects the text of *Grace Abounding*—a view of the Christian walk as a life-long, often terrifying struggle. This perspective of fear and danger dominates his prison writings. The second part—the more tranquil pilgrimage of Christian’s wife Christiana—reflects the calm and peace that Bunyan finally enjoyed at the end of his life.

In his later life Bunyan earned some reputation as a peacemaker or mediator in disputes. In August 1688, he set out on horseback on such a mission, going forty miles to Reading to try to reconcile a father and his adult son. On his return trip he encountered heavy rains, caught a chill, and took shelter with a friend in London. Worn out by his work and his travel, he succumbed to the fever and died, on August 31, at the age of sixty. He is buried in Bunhill Fields, London.

Early in its publication history, *Grace Abounding* was expanded by Bunyan himself to include a dramatic-type rendering of the court proceedings that resulted in Bunyan’s conviction. Here Bunyan’s strict convictions become evident, including his vehement condemnation of the Anglican Church’s *Book of Common Prayer*, and, by implication, any prayer that is written beforehand, and then read. It also includes a play-by-play account of his young wife’s courageous appeal of his case before the assizes (periodic county, superior court sessions). The book ends with a brief tribute written by a contemporary, testifying to Bunyan’s good reputation and character. It describes him physically, “tall of stature, strong boned, though not corpulent, somewhat of a ruddy face . . . wearing his hair on his upper lip . . . his hair reddish,” and relates the circumstance of

his death. Here finally we see names: for his second wife, Elizabeth, and his children, including blind Mary, who had predeceased her parents.

Today's readers may puzzle at Bunyan's convictions—that sins of thought and word, rather than menacing deed, could place him outside God's redemptive work; that a believer's faith and obedience to call and principle mean more than his family. But a perceived extremism is no reason to discount the hidden treasures in this inspiring classic. In *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan lays out a thoughtful, logical analysis of scripture, countering one verse against another.

Why, how many scriptures are there against me? There are but three or four; and cannot God miss them, and save me?

And,

Lord, I thought, if both these [contradictory] scriptures should meet in my heart at once, I wonder which of them would get the better of me.

He then, in the presence of his reader—including his own children and us today—wrestles with scripture as Jacob did with the angel.

Ultimately, obviously, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ wins over the condemnation of the devil. Bunyan claims peace of mind: grace abounding to the chief of sinners.

Now I could look from myself to Him and should reckon, that all those graces of God that now were green on me, were yet but like those . . . four-pence-halfpennies that rich men carry in their purses, when their gold is in their trunks at home. Oh! I saw my gold was in my trunk at home! In Christ my Lord and Savior. Now Christ was all: all my wisdom, all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption.

—*Grace Abounding*, paragraph 232