

A DREAMER AND HIS WONDERFUL DREAM

The Story of John Bunyan and The Pilgrim's Progress

by

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Chapter 1

John Bunyan, The Early Days

It may be well, before we consider the story of "*The Pilgrim's Progress*" itself, to devote a little time to the history of the man who wrote the book, which has been classed, by those well qualified to judge, as the next best book to the Bible. His biography is as interesting as his book and we shall see later how much of his own life's history has been woven into the texture of his immortal allegory.

Sometime during the year 1628 John Bunyan was born in a little village of Elstow, near to the town of Bedford, in Bedfordshire England.

We know very little of his parentage except that his father was a tinker to trade and extremely poor. John Bunyan, in later years wrote "my descent was of a low and inconsiderable generation, my father's house being of that rank that was the meanest and the most despised occupation of those days." We may be thankful that "God is no respecter of persons," and that He has declared in His Word that "**Not many mighty, not many noble, are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty . . . that no flesh should glory in his presence**" (I Corinthians 1:26-29). It matters not how poor a person may be, or how lowly a station he may occupy in life; the moment that person becomes a Christian he is made a child of GOD, an heir of GOD and a joint heir with the Lord JESUS CHRIST. GOD delights to "**raise the poor out of the dust, that He might set him with princes**" (Psalm 113:7-8).

His education was such as the poor people of the day could afford.

He had scarcely grasped the elements of reading and writing before he was taken from school in order to help his father mend pots and pans, and thus aid in keeping the ever present wolf from the door. He soon forgot the little he had learned and tells us that he quickly developed into an idle boy, who for swearing, lying and blasphemy had few, if any, equals in the neighborhood. He was a ringleader in the village wickedness.

He cared nothing for GOD's word or for GOD's beloved SON; neither gave he any time or thought to his fearful state before GOD, or where he would spend eternity. He desired his own way, and nothing pleased him better

than when he was in indulging in all sorts of sinful pleasures.

This is a graphic description of the natural condition of all. We may not have gone to the same lengths in sin as did John Bunyan, but the fact remains that GOD in His word has declared, "**There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no not one. . . . for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:10-13).

In his young days Bunyan enlisted as a soldier and took part in the Civil War which was then raging between the Parliament and the King.

At the siege of Leicester he was amongst those who were ordered to make an assault; but another man obtained permission to go instead of him, and in the early part of the battle was killed.

This caused him to think seriously about eternal things, but like many others he tried to put off these thoughts by plunging deeper into the pleasures of sin, until he became notorious in the countryside for his ungodliness and vice. Time and time again did GOD speak to him.

He was rescued from drowning many times and on other occasions was delivered from death in a wonderful way; but in spite of all these tokens to him of GOD's love, forbearance, goodness and long suffering, they failed to bring him to repentance: "**Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance**" (Romans 2:4). He seemed determined to go his own way, and become "the master of his fate and the captain of his soul."

At the early age of nineteen John Bunyan was married. All his wife brought to him in the way of wedding presents were two good books that her father, a very poor but godly man, gave her. These books were entitled "*The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*," and "*The Practice of Piety*".

By this time he had practically lost the faculty of reading; so his wife encouraged and helped him to read these two excellent books, and persuaded him to turn over a new leaf and adopt a religious life. This John Bunyan seemed quite willing to do, and each Sunday went twice to church, repeating the responses and singing with the best of them; but all the while clinging to his sins.

He had to learn, like all others who expect to be in Heaven, that reformation and a religious profession are no substitutes for the new birth or regeneration. The words of our LORD JESUS, addressed to the most moral and religious man of his day, need to be carefully pondered, "**Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God**" (John 3:3).

It was the custom in those days, as alas, it is in these days, to make Sunday a mixture of the professed worship of GOD and the pleasures of sin.

There were two services at the church, after which the same bells summoned the parishioners to take part in May games, Whitsun ales, morris dances, and various other sports. One day a minister preached on the evils of desecrating the LORD's day, and showed how wrong it was to use this day that commemorated the rising from the dead of the LORD JESUS, as a time of sport. This brought conviction to the soul of Bunyan and he determined he would no longer indulge in these things on Sunday; but after a good dinner he eased his conscience and went out

as usual to his games.

Scarcely had he taken his bat to play a game called "cat," when suddenly he seemed to hear a voice from Heaven saying, "Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to Heaven; or have thy sins and go to hell?"

It seemed to him that CHRIST was standing face to face with him, and was about to visit well-deserved judgment upon him. He left the game for a few moments, and thought upon these things.

As thoughts of a holy GOD crowded into his mind he argued thus, "If I am already damned, I may just as well be damned for many sins as for a few sins."

With this fearful decision he returned to his game again, and none of his companions guessed for one moment what an awful transaction had taken place. Thus did Bunyan again reject the gracious warning of the GOD Who loved him.

Before we judge him for this, let us each ask himself the question, "Have I ever rejected GOD's message to me?" Think of the many times that GOD has spoken through some preacher of the Gospel, or some Gospel tract, or through the death of some relative and friend. Have we heeded the message and turned to the Saviour; or have we, like Bunyan, hardened to GOD's voice which speaks to each one saying, "**Because there is wrath, beware lest He take thee away with His stroke: then a great ransom cannot deliver thee**" (Job 36:18).

Bunyan's conscience, however, was ill at ease.

In spite of his rejection of the heavenly warning, GOD graciously continued to deal with him, and sought to bring him to repentance. One day while he was cursing and swearing with some of his ungodly companions, one of the worst women in the village passed by, and hearing his fearful language rebuked him in these words, "You ungodly wretch! I never heard such swearing in my life! You are enough to spoil all the youth in the whole town!"

This rebuke put him to shame, coming as it did from a woman of evil reputation.

Once again he determined to become a better man and leave off this outwardly vile conduct for the future.

This he did, and everyone wondered at the change and spoke well of him, both to his face and behind his back. This pleased him considerably, and he became quite proud of the achievement. He practiced self-denial, thinking by so doing he would gain more favor with GOD. He gave up dancing, much as he secretly yearned for it. He used to be very fond of bell ringing but this also he denied himself thinking by so doing he would gain the favor with GOD. He would often stand outside the belfry tower and look longingly within as his companions rang the bells; but he was afraid to enter, lest GOD in judgment should cause one of the bells to fall from its place and kill him.

One day this thought came to him, "Supposing the whole tower were to fall and crush me! I should certainly be doomed!" This settled him, and he stayed away from the place altogether, and in the eyes of his neighbors became the model of what a Christian should be.

Alas for John Bunyan! He was making the mistake that many, both before and since his day, have made. He was attempting to get right with GOD on the ground of his own good works, resolutions and religious exercises; whereas GOD distinctly and plainly declares in His word that "**By grace are ye saved through faith . . . not of**

works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians. 2:8-9), and again, "**Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy he saved us"** (Titus 3:5).

GOD does not save sinners because of good works they have done or ever will do; but because of the work His beloved SON accomplished on Calvary's Cross, when He bore our sins in His own body on the tree, and died in the stead of the sinner, and thus satisfied every claim of GOD against the guilty one. He who seeks to be justified by his own deeds, thus ignores and rejects the only provision that GOD in His grace offers to the lost and guilty children of men.

In fact, John Bunyan himself afterward described his condition during this period in these words: "I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite. I did all I did, either to be seen of, or to be well spoken of by men. I knew not CHRIST, nor grace, nor faith, nor hope." Let us see to it that we do not fall into this same error, but owning our own need as lost and guilty sinners, let us trust in the finished work of GOD's dear SON, and receive Him in simple faith to be our own personal Saviour, and thus being justified by faith, have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

However, better times were ahead for one day as he was walking through the streets of Bedford, crying as his trade demanded, "Pots and pans to mend," he saw a few poor women sitting at a door, and they were speaking in such a manner as Bunyan had never heard before.

They spoke with assurance of their soul's salvation; of the preciousness of the LORD JESUS; of their knowledge of Him as their personal Saviour; and at the same time, of the wretchedness of their state by nature. This was all new to him, and he listened with great attention to their conversation and sought their counsel as to his own state before GOD.

This they willingly gave to him from the Word of GOD, and showed him first of all his need of a Saviour. They unfolded to him for the first time in his life, that all his own righteousnesses, in which he was trusting, were in GOD's sight like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6); that in spite of all his efforts to please GOD it was utterly impossible, for "**they that are in the flesh cannot please God**" (Romans 8:8).

They pointed out to him that "**Being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish his own righteousness, he had not submitted himself to the righteousness of God**" (Romans 10:3). In other words, Bunyan was shown his true state in GOD's sight, that of a helpless, lost and guilty sinner.

Next, they pointed out GOD's wondrous love in giving His only SON, Who came from Heaven to seek and save the lost and Who, on Calvary's Cross suffered the JUST One for us, the unjust, that He might bring us to GOD. He was shown from the Bible that all the work necessary for the salvation of lost and ruined sinners, the LORD JESUS had accomplished to GOD's entire satisfaction through the sacrifice of Himself.

Then they pointed out the "easy, artless, unencumbered plan" of salvation through faith in CHRIST's finished work and acceptance of Him as Saviour and confession of Him as LORD (Romans 10:9-10).

Thus John Bunyan, for the first time in his life, heard the Gospel of the grace of GOD, Who used the testimony of these simple, but godly women to arouse him to a sense of his deep need of salvation. He now began to read the Bible for himself, and he was confirmed in his belief that what the women had told him was true.

The result of this reading of the Scriptures was to produce within him a deep sense of his guilt and sin. As he saw how holy, just, righteous and sin-hating GOD was, and how grievously he had sinned against Him; he began to realize that his sins were indeed a burden, and that in GOD's sight he was deserving only of His righteous wrath, condemnation and banishment from His presence for all eternity.

I wonder how many of my readers have discovered this for themselves? Perhaps some are trying, like Bunyan, to make themselves fit for GOD's presence by their good works and religious observances, and ignoring that GOD has said, "**By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified**" (Romans 3:20). Remember that,

"Your fair pretensions must wholly be waived,
Your best resolutions be crossed;
You never can know yourself to be saved,
Till you own you are utterly lost."

Bunyan now began to ask questions of these Christian women to which they could give no reply. He was possessed of a very vivid imagination, and what would have satisfied most people utterly failed to give him that peace he was seeking. As fast as one difficulty was solved, another would take its place, until he despaired of ever finding the peace he sought.

They advised him to go to their pastor, a man named Mr. Gifford, who knew the Scriptures much better than they, and he would probably have all his difficulties solved. Thus counselled, Bunyan went to see Mr. Gifford, and was indeed greatly helped by his soberer judgment, and excellent understanding in the word of GOD. He was told to study the Bible more carefully, and to rest in childlike faith in what he found recorded therein; for only then could he have a sure foundation on which to rest for the assurance of his eternal salvation.

The result of this further study of the Holy Scriptures was to more deeply impress him with the sense of his guilt; and often, he would retire to the privacy of his little attic, and cry to GOD for mercy.

It seemed to him that the more he strove to obtain peace the deeper his distress became; and the nearer he sought to get to GOD, the further GOD seemed to depart from him. He had to learn, as every one who is saved, that "not saved are we by trying, from self can come no aid," and that

"It is not thy tears of repentance nor prayers,
But the blood that atones for the soul;
On Him then Who shed it, thou mayest at once
Thy weight of iniquity roll.

Look! Look! Look and live!"

- (Isaiah 45:22)

He would often wander into the fields at evening, and alone with GOD would cry from the depths of his heart, "What must I do to be saved?"

Sometimes he thought he was possessed by a demon. He would have gladly exchanged his life for that of a dog. He regretted the day he had ever been born, and was of all men most miserable.

Sometimes he was tempted to take his own life, but he was afraid to do so, because he knew that this would but seal his eternal doom. Truly, there is no trouble like soul trouble: "**A wounded spirit, who can bear?**"

Yet we can thank GOD for the deep experience through which he passed, for when deliverance came, he was able in a peculiar measure to enter into the soul difficulties of others, and thus be of great help to them.

On one occasion, when particularly depressed, the thought came to his mind that he had committed the unpardonable sin and consequently could not possibly be saved, however greatly he desired to be.

In this frame of mind, he consulted a very old Christian and confided this new difficulty to him; but to his dismay, this Christian, who ought to have known better, informed him that probably he was right and had indeed committed the unpardonable sin!

Thus did Bunyan prove the truth of the Scripture which says, "Vain is the help of man." The effect of this experience was to drive him more and more to the inerrant word of GOD that alone can make the sinner "**Wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus**" (I Timothy 3:15).

Perhaps GOD is dealing with you, my reader, at this present moment, and showing you your need of regeneration, and also your helplessness to save yourself. GOD does this in order that you may be brought to an end of yourself, and led to see that your only hope for time and eternity is in the work that the LORD JESUS accomplished on the Cross when He put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself: "**For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself**" (Hebrews 9:26).

A man once said it took him forty years to learn three things:

- first, that he could do nothing to save himself;
- second, that GOD did not want him to do anything to save himself;
- third, that the LORD JESUS had finished, fully and completely, to GOD's entire satisfaction, all the work necessary to save the lost and guilty sinner who simply trusted in Him.

It was while Bunyan was passing through this period of deep exercise of soul, that a book came into his possession that was a great help to him. It was Luther's "Treatise on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians."

This book so nearly described his condition, difficulties, doubts, and fears that he thought Luther must have written this book for his special benefit!

He valued this book next to his Bible, and spent hours reading it and comparing it very diligently with the Bible. It is no wonder that when Bunyan was saved by the grace of GOD, he was mightily used of GOD to help others in the way of life. GOD has said, "**Ye shall see me, and ye shall find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.**"

If GOD is dealing with you now, give yourself no rest or peace until you come to the assurance of salvation revealed in GOD's precious word through faith in the crucified and risen Son of GOD.

It is difficult to say just when the soul saving truth burst into the darkened heart of John Bunyan, for the Devil with his fury darts of doubt was ever ready to quench any little light that he received from the Word of GOD.

The book, "*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*," records his experiences and should be read by all desiring a fuller knowledge of his conversion.

In this autobiography, he speaks of an occasion when he asked his wife if she remembered a Scripture which had in it the words "**But ye are come unto Jesus.**"

She could not recall it, so he began to read his New Testament until he came to those words in Hebrews 12:22-24, "**But ye are come . . . unto Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel.**"

As he read these words a flood of divine light seemed to fill his soul as he realized that the Lord JESUS CHRIST was the alone Saviour and MEDIATOR, and that salvation, full, free and eternal was the possession of all who trusted in Him and rested in His finished work. He believed the glad message, and that night he could scarcely sleep for the joy that filled him in the conscious sense of the forgiveness of sins. Yet after this wonderful experience, he was plagued with many doubts, and often was in the depths of despair.

Deliverance came fully and finally one day as he was passing through a field. As he was musing, this sentence fell upon his soul, "**Thy righteousness is in Heaven.**" With the eye of his soul he saw that the Lord JESUS CHRIST at the right hand of GOD was his personal righteousness.

He perceived that His work on the cross had satisfied GOD completely on his behalf in token of which He had been raised from the dead and exalted to be a PRINCE and a Saviour. He saw for the first time the glorious truth of II Corinthians 5:21, "**For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.**"

He discovered that his good frame of mind did not make his righteousness any better, nor did his bad frame of mind make it worse; but his righteousness was a Person, the One Who had loved him and had given Himself for him and Who was the same yesterday, today and forever!

All Bunyan's doubts were now dissolved like mist before the rising sun. He was fully and finally delivered from his slavish fears, and translated into the glorious liberty of the children of GOD. Henceforth he ceased to be occupied with his own realizings, fears and doubts and looked away from himself to the Person and work of the Lord JESUS CHRIST.

Would that this were the experience of each reader! We need to remember, however, that all people do not have the same difficulties, doubts and fears, nor the same depth of conviction of sin that Bunyan had.

But all who are really and truly saved have taken their place before GOD as lost and guilty sinners; and as such have believed that CHRIST died for their sins, took their place at Calvary, and suffered in their stead. They have accepted Him as their personal Saviour, and have the assurance from the word of GOD that they are saved.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and

with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9-10)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 3:16; 5:24)

"And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:30-31)

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians. 2:8-9).

Read these Scriptures for yourself and rest not until you can say,

"O happy day that fixed my choice,
On Thee my Saviour and my GOD;
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,
And spread its raptures all abroad --
Happy day! Happy day!
When JESUS washed my sins away!"

~ end of chapter 1 ~