

The Life Of John Bunyan

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[0 : 00] As you know this evening we're beginning a study on John Bunyan's most famous work, The Pilgrim's Progress. And I'm sure that many of you have read The Pilgrim's Progress, maybe you read it years ago when you were first converted. But if you've never read The Pilgrim's Progress before, I would encourage you to take this opportunity to do so. Because next to the Bible, The Pilgrim's Progress is the most printed and most popular book in the world. It has been translated into more than 200 languages. And as a book, it has never been out of print. And so The Pilgrim's Progress, it comes to you highly recommended.

In fact, it was Spurgeon who encouraged his congregation to read The Pilgrim's Progress at least once a year. Because he said that in doing so, that every Christian would be reminded of where they have come from and where they are going as they journey through life.

And that was actually the full title of John Bunyan's book, because it wasn't just called The Pilgrim's Progress. In those days, a good title, a good book had to have a long title.

And John Bunyan's work was no different, because it was called The Pilgrim's Progress from this world to that which is to come. And that's what Pilgrim's Progress is all about. It's an allegory about the spiritual journey of a Christian, where the main character, he is first of all called Graceless. But by reading his Bible and by receiving direction from an evangelist, he comes to know the Lord, and he becomes a Christian. And the whole story is about this one man who's on a journey. He's on a pilgrimage, and he's travelling from the city of destruction all the way to the celestial city. And you know, there's actually a point in the book, The Pilgrim's Progress, there's a point where the main character, he's asked to identify himself. And he confesses, he says, at first I was called Graceless, but now my name is Christian. I have come from the city of destruction, and I am going to Mount Zion. I am a pilgrim, and I am going to the celestial city. And you know, is that not the testimony of every Christian? Is it not the confession of every Christian who begins their spiritual journey through faith in Jesus Christ, where they can say, maybe you can say tonight, at first I was called Graceless, but now my name is Christian.

I have come from the city of destruction, I am going to Mount Zion, I am a pilgrim, I am going to the celestial city. But you know, before we begin our journey following Christian from the city of destruction, through the slough of despond, around the wicked gate, up the hill called difficulty, passed the, the past down in castle, and then on towards the celestial city, before we follow Christian on that journey, I thought we would this evening meet the man behind the message. I want us to meet this evening, I want us to meet John Bunyan, because it was while John Bunyan was viewed as an enemy of the king, and imprisoned for preaching the gospel, that he penned the pilgrims progeny. And yet what's remarkable is that Bunyan didn't see his time in prison as an obstacle to the gospel. No, he saw his time in prison as an opportunity for the gospel. Because similar to the testimony of Joseph, when Joseph was in Egypt, Bunyan could say, the king meant evil against me, but the Lord meant it for good. And so this evening I want us to meet John Bunyan. Because if we're going to know something about the man, we'll, we'll understand more about his message. And as you know, when we interview a minister, we'll do this this evening at our congregational fellowship with the Reverend Diver MacDonald. When we usually interview a minister at a congregational fellowship, we use four headings. You remember we use the headings, childhood conversion, call, and congregation. And I'd like us to do the same this evening with John [4 : 26] Bunyan. But because John Bunyan made such a huge contribution to the Christian church, I'd like to add a fifth heading, contribution. And so this evening, let's meet John Bunyan.

Let's meet John Bunyan using the headings, childhood conversion, call, congregation, and contribution. Childhood conversion, call, congregation, and contribution. So first of all, childhood. Childhood. John Bunyan was born 392 years ago this month. He was born in the month of

November in 1628 in a little village called Elstow, about a mile south of Bedford in Bedford, Shire, which is in southeast England. It's unknown whether John had siblings, but his mother was called Margaret, and his father was called Thomas. And Thomas Bunyan, he made his living by mending pots and pans. And you know, as the head of the home and the provider for his family, Thomas Bunyan, he didn't like to refer to himself using that more degrading title of his trade. He didn't like to call himself a tinker. Instead, he referred to himself as a hardworking brazier. Nevertheless, like many others at the time, the life of the Bunyan family was a severe struggle with poverty. And yet as parents, they were still able to send the young Bunyan to school. In his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan writes about his parents. He says, it pleased God to put into their hearts to put me to school, to learn both to read and write, though which I also attained according to the rate of other poor men's children. Now other than that, we know very little about the young John Bunyan, except that like many children brought up in a God fearing home, John Bunyan's sin and his soul bothered him. He may not have understood what was going on at the time, but he tells us, it was my delight to be taken captive by the devil at his will and being filled with all unrighteousness. I had but few equals for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God. And yet, you know, for all this outward cursing, Bunyan had a tender conscience, because he believed that from the age of about nine or ten, Bunyan believed that he so offended the Lord by his swearing, that the Lord often frightened him and terrified him with dreams and visions of hell. Bunyan says, I would be greatly afflicted and troubled with the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell, and there 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 great day of judgment. Yet says Bunyan, I could not let my sins go. I could not let my sins go. And you know, many people are like that today, aren't they? They're terrified of going to hell, but they're not willing to flee from their sin and run to the Savior. They're terrified of hell, but they're not willing to let go of sin and run to the Savior, Jesus Christ.

But you know, the context to Bunyan's childhood is also very helpful to understanding what he went through, because the year on which Bunyan was born was a momentous year for both the crown and the state. In 1628, the relationship between King Charles I and the British Parliament, it collapsed. And King Charles, he dissolved the Parliament, and that dissolving of Parliament, it would last for over a decade. Of course, Charles I, he lived by the philosophy of his father, King James VI. And you'll remember King James VI, he had successfully brought about the Union of the Crowns in 1603, making England, Ireland and Scotland this United Kingdom, but only on paper. Because in practice, it seemed that the newly United Kingdom was anything but united. Because like his father before him, Charles I believed in the divine right of kings, that the king is like a little god on the earth. And as a little god, Charles I, he tried to undermine the state and overrule the church. He tried to undermine the state and overrule the church. To the point that Charles, he tried to impose his Episcopalian theology that the king is the head of the church. He tried to impose it upon the Scottish Presbyterian Covenanters. And as you would expect, as he marched north towards Scotland, the Scottish Covenanters, they sent their king packing. They affirmed to him that north of Hadrian's Wall is where there is a

[9 : 49] Covenanted Nation, where Christ is the only king and head of his church. And you know, with such an embarrassing defeat, King Charles I, he had to then reconvene Parliament, which eventually resulted in civil war breaking out in 1642. There was a war between the sovereign and the state.

And you know, it was the only civil war in British history, but it would last until 1651, during which time hundreds of thousands of people died, including King Charles himself, who was beheaded by his own Parliament. Now Bunyan's childhood, it was certainly intertwined with the civil war. Because two years into the civil war, in 1644, Bunyan's mother died. And within two months, Bunyan's father remarried. But you know, it was a marriage that was going to drive a wedge between Bunyan Jr. and Bunyan Sr. Because not long after his father remarried, John Bunyan, he signed up for the civil war at the age of only 16. Bunyan went to fight on the side of the Parliament, although it was a war he didn't really understand and a war he didn't really believe in. And yet the civil war was the means of once again bringing Bunyan face to face with the reality of eternity. Because there was an occasion during his three years as a soldier that Bunyan was, he saw what a substitutionary sacrifice really looks like. There was one soldier in Bunyan's battalion who wanted to stand watch instead of Bunyan. And of course Bunyan, he didn't object.

But what Bunyan witnessed made him think about what could have been. Because as Bunyan's substitute, as he stood guard one night, standing in his place watching for the enemy, Bunyan saw his substitute being shot in the head by one of the King's men. What could have been? And you know, sadly, like many of the people in our community, when Bunyan witnessed the reality of death, instead of softening his heart, it only hardened it. His heart hardened to the reality of death. You know Bunyan even confessed later, these things were judgments and mercy, but neither of them did awaken my soul to righteousness. Wherefore I sin still and grew more and more rebellious against God and careless of my own salvation. Which brings us to consider secondly Bunyan's conversion. Childhood conversion. Bunyan left the army around 1647 and things started to change when he got married about a year later. Now, although we don't know much about Bunyan's wife, we do know that like many Christian wives, she had a massive influence and impact upon her husband's spiritual condition. Bunyan says, 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 as household stuff as a dish or a spoon between 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 Christian books says Bunyan, I would sometimes read with her. She also would be often telling me of what a godly man her father was and what a strict and holy life he lived, both in word and indeed. You know, like many of the unconverted friends in our congregation and our community, there were spiritual struggles going on in the heart and life of John Bunyan. But the impact and influence of Bunyan's wife, it encouraged him and even enabled Bunyan to attend church twice on the Lord's Day. However, Bunyan's heart, it continued to be divided. He was always halting between two opinions, because on the one hand he would sing with the saints in church, and yet on the other, he would strive with sinners in Sunday sport. In fact, like many people in our own day,

[14:27] Sunday sports proved to be the battleground of Bunyan's spiritual struggles. Bunyan loved sport and for him Sunday was the only day he had time to engage in it. You know, there was one Sunday at which Bunyan attended the morning service in the local church, and it was a sermon that was preached by the local vicar, Reverend Christopher Hall. He preached a sermon on the sin of Sabbath breaking. And like many who were present in the church that day, Bunyan thought that the vicar sermon was directed straight at him, to the point that Bunyan, he left church that day and he went home as he describes himself with this burden upon his spirit. But he says, my Sunday dinner speedily drove away my self-condemning thoughts. And shaking the sermon out of his mind, Bunyan went to play his Sunday sports with the Elstow lads on the Village Green. But it was actually that day during his Sunday sports that Bunyan confessed. He says, 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.

Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell. And you know, although it shook Bunyan for about a month or so, although this event shook Bunyan for about a month or so, it still didn't stop him. He still carried on in sin. Because on another occasion, only about a month or two later, Bunyan was standing at a shop window, cursing and swearing so loudly that a woman in the street stopped and rebuked Bunyan, saying to him that he was the ungodliest fellow that she had ever heard. And you know, that rebuked really got to Bunyan. Because Bunyan's rebuke, it called for reformation. And Bunyan, he sought to undertake that reformation by cutting out his cursing. Bunyan started reading the Bible more. And he said that it helped his outward reformation, which Bunyan, he often used the 10 commandments to set before himself as the way to heaven. But you know, the outward reformation of Bunyan's life where he stopped swearing was such that he soon became the talk of the town. And many people thought that Bunyan had actually been converted at that point and become a godly man. Unfortunately, all these comments about Bunyan becoming a Christian and being a godly man, they flattered Bunyan's vanity. But you know, there were nothing more than self satisfaction and self righteousness. You know, Bunyan actually said of himself, he said, when he was in that self righteous state, he said, God cannot but now be pleased with me. For there is no one in the whole of England who can please God better than I. And you know, sadly, like others before him and others after him, there was an outward, there may have been an outward reformation in Bunyan's life. But there was no inward transformation. There was an outward reformation, but no inward transformation. And that continued until Bunyan's self righteousness was rudely shaken. It was one day when he was working in Bedford, working as a

tinker doing the same as his father, his tinker's trade. And he was working in Bedford and he overheard four women who were sitting talking about the Lord. And what struck Bunyan was their Christian love. And their joy when talking about the things of Christ and of eternity. And these things really got to Bunyan. And like many today, Bunyan had actually thought that Christianity was just about a system of rules and regulations and restrictions, where you entered heaven by applying good works in your life and avoiding bad works. But you know, Bunyan, he was so intrigued by the conversations of these women that he came back time and time again on many occasions just to hear them talk. And you know, it was actually these women who introduced Bunyan to their pastor, the godly Mr. Gifford.

And the godly Mr. Gifford, he invited Bunyan to his house to give him some spiritual counsel. As one writer puts it, Mr. Gifford was doubtless the honored evangelist who like Christian in the pilgrims progress pointed him to the wicked gate by instructing him in the knowledge of the Gospel. [19:22] Mr. Gifford, he says, was the means of Bunyan's conversion. His conversation and preaching were greatly blessed to the once wicked tinker of Elstow. And as Bunyan says himself, it was through the pastoral care of the evangelist Mr. Gifford that the salvation of his soul became his all in all to him. And the Bible, he says, became precious to him that he read it like he had never read it before. But also when Bunyan found an old copy of Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians, he says that he read it with amazement and thankfulness that he could see his own spiritual experience mirrored within. Bunyan said, it was as if this book had been written out of my heart.

And of all the books that I had ever seen, it was most fit for a wounded conscience. Now I found, says Bunyan, that I loved Christ dearly. My soul cleaved unto him. My affections cleaved unto him. I felt love to him as hot as fire. Christ was my Lord and Savior. His righteousness was mine. His merits mine. His victory also mine. Christ was my all, all my wisdom. He was all my righteousness. He was all my sanctification. He was all my redemption. Christ was my all in all. And so that was Bunyan's conversion. Childhood conversion in thirdly, call. Call. You know, having received direction and discipleship from the godly Mr. Gifford, Bunyan, along with his wife and blind daughter, Mary, they joined the church in Bedford around the year 1653. And with their second daughter, Elizabeth, she joined by being born into the congregation the following year. Bunyan was then received into the church by being baptized in the River Ouse near Bedford. And then then in 1655, at the age of 27, Bunyan was ordained as a deacon in the congregation. But 1655 was to prove a difficult year for Bunyan, because he first of all lost his wife, to whom he owed so much for her influence and impact that she had had upon his life. Then later that year, along with the congregation in Bedford, Bunyan was left bereft of his preacher, pastor and friend, the godly Mr. [22:03] Gifford, who died in September 1655. The loss of the godly Mr. Gifford was felt within the congregation and the community. But amazingly, it gave opportunity to Bunyan to become a use, to become useful in the life of his congregation, because it wasn't long until the congregation were urging and encouraging Bunyan to preach. And you know, like almost all preachers, Bunyan was very nervous when he started preaching. He preferred to give a quiet word of exhortation rather than to preach a whole sermon.

But you know, with patience and experience, Bunyan developed his gift of preaching to the point that many said of him that he was no common preacher. Bunyan's words, they came home with power to the souls of his hearers, who were both challenged and also comforted by the words of the gospel.

Bunyan also preached wherever he could find the opportunity. He preached in woods, he preached in barns, he preached on village greens, he even preached in churches when he was invited. He was an evangelist. Bunyan was an evangelist at heart who liked best to preach in the darkest places of the county where people were furthest from Christ. And remarkably, people came in their hundreds to hear Bunyan preach. Although it's said that some came to mock the once profaning tinker, who are now become the preaching tinker. Nevertheless, Bunyan's preaching made an impact upon many, which might even have tempted him to vanity. Yet the conviction which Bunyan held, Bunyan, you know, he had this conviction that he was just an instrument. He was only an instrument in the hand of a higher power. And that kept Bunyan humble. And you know, with the fame of his preaching spreading far and wide and invitations to preach coming from throughout the county, Bunyan's sense of call to ministry became increasingly evident, not only to himself, but also to others. As a result,

Bunyan, he was soon relieved from his duties as a deacon in the Bedford congregation. And after some solemn prayer and fasting, he was called and appointed as a preacher of the word. At this point, Bunyan wasn't appointed as the pastor and preacher of the congregation in Bedford. Rather, he was this itinerant preacher who would go to all the surrounding villages, presenting the Gospel to lost sinners. However, Bunyan's appointment to preach was not a legally state authorized license to preach, as it was for those in the Church of England. Those in the Church of England, that they were state authorized, they were ministers in the Church of England, and they also had to follow all the rules of the state, the state control. But for Bunyan, he was free from state control for a time. And the fact that it was only for a time would prove problematic in the coming years, because a sign that things were beginning to change was in 1657, when Bunyan was indicted for preaching, preaching without a license. Although nothing came of it, nothing came of that time until 1660, which brings us to consider, fourthly, his congregation. Childhood conversion called congregation. Congregation. You know, what people don't often realize about John Bunyan is that he was a free church minister. Of course, the free church of Scotland wouldn't be established for another 200 years, until the disruption in 1843. When you'll remember that some 400 ministers, they came out of the established Church of Scotland, affirming that Christ alone is the king and head of the church, and that the government of Christ's church is to be distinct from, and not subordinate to, the state government. But the desire to be free from state control had been a long battle, not only in Scotland, but also in England. Because you know, the whole Puritan movement, it was born out of a desire to be loosed from the bonds of the state controlled Church of England, because the Puritans, they believed that the Church of England was too similar to the Roman Catholic Church, and they were right. Moreover, the Puritans accused the Church of England of having too many practices of pomp and popery, especially when it came to the Common Book of Prayer. And again, they were right. And as you'd expect, Bunyan was a Puritan. John Bunyan was a Puritan, and for many years he belonged not to the Congregation of Barbra's free church, but the Congregation of Bedford Free Church. But it was in November 1660, only a few months after the restoration of King Charles II, that there was this warrant out for Bunyan's arrest. [27 : 25] At the time that night, Bunyan was preaching near the village of Harlington, about 13 miles away from Bedford. And during the service, Bunyan was arrested. He was arrested according to the act of Conventicles, which made it illegal for anyone to preach who wasn't a minister in the state controlled church of England. And Bunyan, because of his arrest, he was imprisoned for three months in the Bedford County Jail. And he was warned that if at the end of his three months sentence, if he didn't stop preaching, he would remain in prison. By this time, Bunyan had remarried. He had remarried a woman called Elizabeth. And in their family home were four young children. But the thing is, Elizabeth would prove a faithful spouse to Bunyan, taking the fight all the way to the house of lords, pleading for her husband's release. And I said that the judge even asked Elizabeth Bunyan one day, the judge asked her the question, will your husband leave off preaching? To which she replied, my Lord, he dares not leave preaching as long as he can speak. He dares not leave preaching as long as he can speak. And as you'd expect, after three months in prison, Bunyan refused to stop preaching.

And he refused to submit to the state controlled church of England. And for that reason, Bunyan remained confined in prison for 12 years, from 1660 to 1672. As you know, it was during his long imprisonment that Bunyan penned his most famous work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. What's remarkable is that he had no books to help him, except the Bible and John Fox's *Book of Martyrs*. There was, however, a period during Bunyan's 12 year sentence when he was released after six years in 1666. But this was short lived. Because you know, as soon as Bunyan was let loose, the first thing he did was go and preach. As soon as he was let out, he went out preaching again. In fact, the police caught Bunyan in the act of preaching and arrested him just as he was putting out the text of his sermon. Strangely, it was while he was still in prison, that John Bunyan was then ordained as the preacher and pastor of the Bedford Church. That was in 1671. And it appears that he was even allowed to attend these church meetings. He was allowed out of prison during the day on the condition that he would return to the Bedford prison each evening. And for that reason, you know, it's safe to say that

Bunyan was in prison, not out of punishment, but out of principle. Bunyan could have walked free at any time if he gave up preaching the gospel. But you know, the gospel was so precious to him.

And the freedom with which the gospel should be, he believed should be preached. That was the reason Bunyan remained in prison until the 17th of May 1672. You know, it was on that day that Bunyan walked out of prison, a free man, and not only free from prison, but also free to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to whosoever. And the thing is Bunyan did. Bunyan preached for the rest of his life. He preached the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ to the large audiences that gathered to hear him. He also had an annual trip to London where he preached with great acceptance. In fact, it said that the Puritan and Oxford theologian and scholar John Owen. John Owen always went to hear John Bunyan preach when he was in London. And John Owen, he was even asked by King Charles II how he, a learned man, would go on sit and listen to an illiterate tinker. But John, John Owen, he kindly responded to King Charles by saying, made please your majesty. Could I possess that tinker ability for preaching? I would most gladly relinquish all my learning. Which brings us fifthly and finally to John Bunyan's contribution. Childhood conversion called congregation and contribution.

Contribution. You know, for being a so-called illiterate tinker from Elstow, John Bunyan wrote and published books for over 30 years. In fact, Bunyan was one of the most published authors in his generation. And today you can buy all his works in a three volume set published by the Banner of Truth. But there are of course Bunyan's classics, such as his autobiography, Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners. There's also his other allegorical works, The Life and Death of Mr. Badman and The Holy War. But you know, there's one book which intrigues me and I'd like to read it. It was what Bunyan wrote two years before he went to prison. And it's a book based upon the parable of the rich man in Lazarus. And the book is called A Few Sins from Hell, where Bunyan, it's said that Bunyan describes hell with such a such vivid detail. And he pleads with sinners in the book to mend their ways and to seek the Lord while he may be found. But as you know, Bunyan's most famous work is of course The Pilgrim's Progress. It was published in 1678. And as you'd expect, it became popular almost at once. But like all good things, they must come to an end.

[33 : 44] John Bunyan died the year of the Glorious Revolution on the 31st of August 1688. And he was only aged 60. He fell asleep in Jesus while in London after becoming ill with a fever. He had travelled to London and got caught in a rainstorm. And he fell ill. And the result was that he passed away.

Interestingly, Bunyan's remains were not buried in his hometown or village of Elstow. He was buried in Bunhill Fields Burial Ground in London. And there he remains to await the Great Resurrection Morning. And so with a short overview of his life, we have met John Bunyan. We've met the man behind him. We've considered his life under five headings, childhood conversion, call congregation, contribution, and then in closing, read John Bunyan. That's what I want to say to you.

Read John Bunyan. Read his works. Read his autobiography, which is grace abounding to the chief of Sinners. Read the pilgrim's progress. Because, you know, your homework for next week is to read the first few pages of the pilgrim's progress. Nothing too strenuous, but it would be good for you to read the account of Christian as he begins his journey, traveling from destruction to despond, where he leaves the city of destruction and he ends up in the slough of despond.

And so this evening we have met the man behind the message. We have met John Bunyan. He was born in 1628 and he died in 1688. A great servant of the Lord who lived for Jesus, who loved Jesus, and who served Jesus both in life and also in his death. So may the Lord bless these thoughts to us.

Let us pray it again. Our Heavenly Father, we give thanks to thee for thy servants, and we thank thee O Lord, and we praise thee that although they lived many years ago, that we are able still to glean from their wisdom and from their writings. We thank thee O Lord, that these things have been preserved for us, for our benefit and for the building up of thy church.

[36 : 15] And Lord we pray that as we study the pilgrims' progress together, that we would learn about Christian, that we would learn what a Christian is and what a Christian isn't, that we would learn to live like a Christian, to be one of Christ's people, to live for Jesus, to love Jesus, to look to Jesus, and to serve Jesus both in life and through our death. O Lord go before us we pray, guide us and lead us and do us good, for we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

Well we're going to bring our time to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 121. Psalm 121 we're singing in the Scottish Salter and we're going to sing the whole Psalm together.

The reason we're singing Psalm 121 is that this Psalm is a pilgrims' Psalm. As you know we're looking at pilgrims' progress and this Psalm, Psalm 121, it describes the experience of a pilgrim as

he travelled, well in this case he travelled from his home towards Jerusalem. He would travel for the feasts in Jerusalem and they'd be singing these songs of ascent. But this pilgrim's Psalm, it reminds us that every Christian when they're on their journey from the city of destruction to the celestial city, every Christian is assured of the Lord's promise. And the Lord's promise is that he keeps every pilgrim. The Lord is our keeper and that's the promise given to us in this Psalm, that the Lord promises to keep his pilgrims both from this time forth and forever more.

And that's what we're singing in this Psalm. I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whenst have come my need, my safety cometh from the Lord, who heaven and earth have made. Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will he slumber that he keeps. Behold he that keeps Israel, he slumbers not, nor sleeps. We'll sing the whole Psalm to God's praise. I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whenst have come my need, my safety cometh from the Lord, who heaven and earth have made.

Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will he slumber that he keeps. Behold he that keeps Israel, he slumbers not, nor sleeps. The Lord keeps the Lord by shape, all by night and the day.

[39 : 35] The foot by night he shall not slide, nor yet the Psalm by name. The Lord shall keep thy soul, he shall be there become a hill. And for thy glory comes and will, God be forever with you.