



John Bunyan (1628-1688)
A Struggling Pilgrim



John Bunyan was born in Elstow near Bedford in 1628, and grew up to suffer under the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660. A somewhat uneducated man – his father was illiterate – he grew up to be a tinker who repaired tools and pots and pans for a living. Yet he came to write one of the enduring classics of English literature, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

As a youth, he lied, blasphemed, and carried on with religion as the least of his thoughts. He served in the Civil War, presumably on the Parliamentary side, but his only reference to it in his writings concerned a man who took his place and was shot dead while he stood sentinel. Leaving the army in 1647, Bunyan married possibly two years later a woman who seems to have curbed his wild lifestyle to some degree. However, he swung between loose-living and legalistic rules for some considerable time, without finding any evangelical peace. In the agonised process of becoming a Christian, Bunyan became so depressed that he envied the toads in the grass. He would be convicted of sin for a time, then return to that sin, and become utterly downcast. Dreams tormented him. Once he was much moved by the godly conversation of some Christian women at Bedford who were discussing the new birth. He remembered them as 'far above, out of my reach', but loitered nearby in order to learn from them. In this time of turmoil he was comforted by words from the parable of the great supper: 'yet there is room' (*Luke 14:22*). Later he was to write: 'Conversion is not the smooth, easy-going process some men seem to think ... It is wounding work, of course, this breaking of the hearts, but without wounding there is no saving.'

Bunyan's autobiographical work, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, tells in its own rather chaotic way of his struggles to come to faith. One day, while passing in the field, he was thinking that his righteousness was in heaven, and he thought of Hebrews 13:8 that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (*Hebrews 13:8*). He felt his chains fall off, and he went home rejoicing for

the grace and love of God. However, at home he found no verse in Scripture that declared 'Thy righteousness is in heaven.' His heart sank until he remembered that Christ is our righteousness (1 Cor.1:30). Bunyan rejoiced: 'Now Christ was all; all my wisdom, all my righteousness, all my sanctification, all my redemption.' Bunyan agonised about whether he could be assured that he was in Christ. One night he contemplated Hebrews 12:22-24, and could scarcely lie on his bed for joy and peace and triumph through Christ. He later recalled the effect of these words: 'Through this blessed sentence the Lord led me over and over, first to this word, and then to that, and showed me wonderful glory in every one of them. These words also have oft since this time been great refreshment to my spirit. Blessed be God for having mercy on me.'

Finally, in 1653 he joined the Baptist Church at Bedford. By 1655 Bunyan was a deacon in the church, and had begun to preach. In 1656 he became the pastor. One of his most powerful sermons was preached to his fellow prisoners on the subject of the New Jerusalem (Rev.21:10-11). However, he was arrested on 12 November 1660, and was to spend almost twelve years in prison. To be released, all he needed to do was sign a paper to say he would not preach again. He refused. In prison he made himself a flute, wrote books, made shoelaces to sell, and sought to shepherd others as best he could. His first child, Mary, had been born blind and was aged ten by 1660, and Bunyan especially felt the trial of being separated from her. He drew comfort from Jeremiah 49:11, and his resolution remained as he put it in his most characteristic hymn:

*There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent,
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.4*

The Pilgrim's Progress first appeared in 1678, part two following in 1684. Initially concerned about using fiction as a vehicle for truth, Bunyan's own sanctified imaginative powers, spiritual struggles, and wonderful grasp of Scripture (Spurgeon said that his blood was 'bibline'), meant that he could convey Scriptural truth in a very vivid way. To him, struggle was part of the Christian life:

*A Christian man is never long at ease,
When one fright's gone, another doth him seize.*

He said: 'I preached what I felt, what I smartingly did feel'. Reversing the usual order, he would write his sermons out *after* he had preached them. In 1688 he was caught in the rain while returning from London, and died of fever on 31 August. The pilgrim had reached home. Peter Barnes, with permission